

northwest

Town Hall Debates Equal Benefits

Commissioner argues ordinance would benefit partners and families

by Jack Turteltaub

Some attending a town hall meeting March 23 dedicated to Portland City Commissioner Sam Adams' proposed equal benefits ordinance viewed it as a debate between advancing the city's anti-discrimination agenda and shaking Portland's anti-business reputation.

If the equal benefits ordinance passes, the same-sex partner and family of a city contractor could receive health care and other benefits as early as January 2007. The ordinance would require private businesses in construction, professional and technical fields that contract with the city to provide the same benefits to domestic partners and their families that they provide to married employees and their families.

With more than \$300 million in annual city contracts, the impact on straight, unmarried couples and sexual minorities, whose relationships are not legally recognized, could be significant.

"All of society benefits when two people decide to make a life together," said Adams. "Unfortunately, the federal government places families in two categories: those headed by a married couple and those not headed by a married couple. The latter are treated as second-class citizens."

Portland would be the first jurisdiction in Oregon to pass an equal benefits ordinance.

Jesse Beason, Adams' senior policy director, says

the city wants to work closely with contractors and insurers to implement the ordinance in a way that does not create unnecessary burdens for businesses.

Some critics say Portland is already perceived as anti-business, so they believe the ordinance might add to that reputation.

Advocates argue that the ordinance would increase the overall quality of life, create more equality of treatment for workers and might even encourage some health insurers and private companies to provide such benefits if they are not already doing so. All these factors could add to Portland's fabled "livability."

Adams notes that cities that strive to provide equal benefits to all families are perceived as more welcoming and in turn are more likely to draw "the best and the brightest."

Adams observes that in recent years Portland has attracted many people in their 20s and early 30s who are artists, musicians, technophiles and entrepreneurs, in large part due to the city's reputation as tolerant and supportive of diversity.

The town hall meeting was the city's first public forum to discuss the ordinance. Most of the 15 attendees represented health insurers or contractors.

Adams told participants that five of the eight largest health insurers in the state already provide domestic partner coverage to most large companies that carry their policies. According to Adams, the

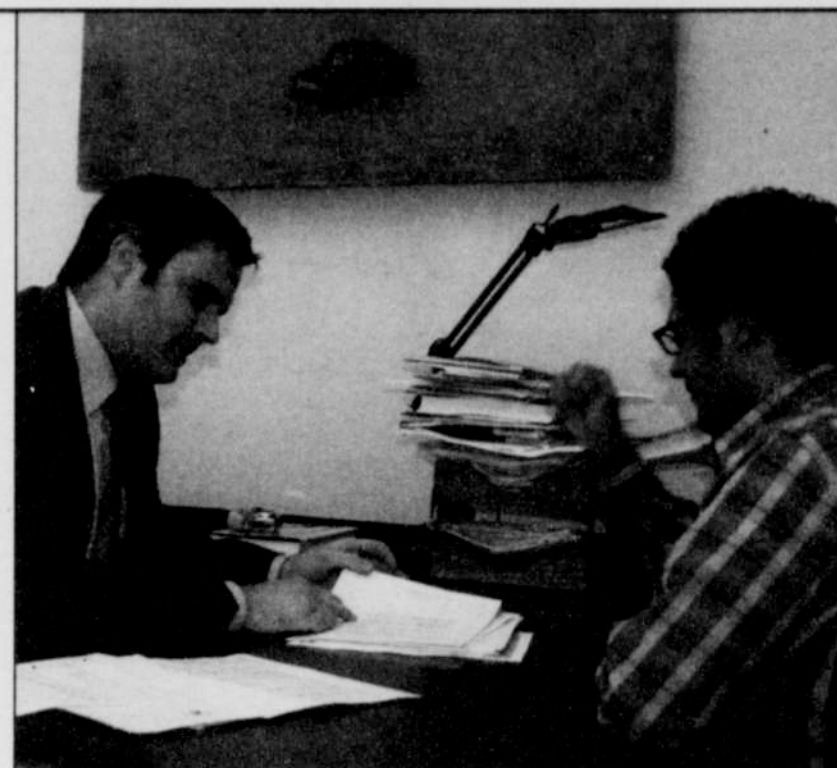
city is in negotiations with two of the remaining insurers, including Kaiser Permanente, to add domestic partner benefits.

The cost of the added benefits, Adams argued, would be relatively small. The tradeoff, he asserted, is the basic fairness of the ordinance and how it would advance the city's nondiscrimination agenda and provide more health care to people in need.

The discussion was cordial and lacking in any dramatic gestures. Ironically, there was no direct mention of gay rights.

Sharon Nielson, a member of the city's Small Business Advisory Council, said she likes the concept of the ordinance but told Adams, "I don't want this perceived by some as another barrier to small businesses doing business with the city." As a business owner with only one employee, she is concerned about reinforcing the city's recent efforts to improve its relationship with small businesses, including those bidding on public contracts.

Bill Martinak, president of the Oregon and Southwest Washington chapter of the National Utility Contractors Association, the trade association for those who lay sewer pipes and power lines, was concerned about how fairly the ordinance



Portland City Commissioner Sam Adams discusses the ordinance with senior policy director Jesse Beason.

would be applied. "The question I have is: Does this ordinance cover all the businesses that contract with the city? I think our members won't have a problem as long as everybody has to follow the same rules."

Adams explained that the city by law can only enforce ordinances with prime contractors, not subcontractors that are hired by the former.

Adams, a fervent supporter of queer rights, registered an acute awareness of recent reverses for Oregon's sexual minority population. "It's been a tough 18 to 24 months for the gay community with the passage of Measure 36, the rejection of civil unions and gay marriages. On the city level, this ordinance is something we can do." 10

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