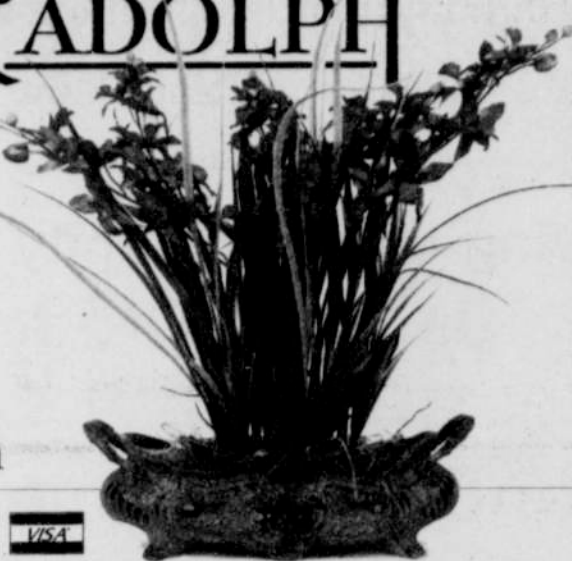




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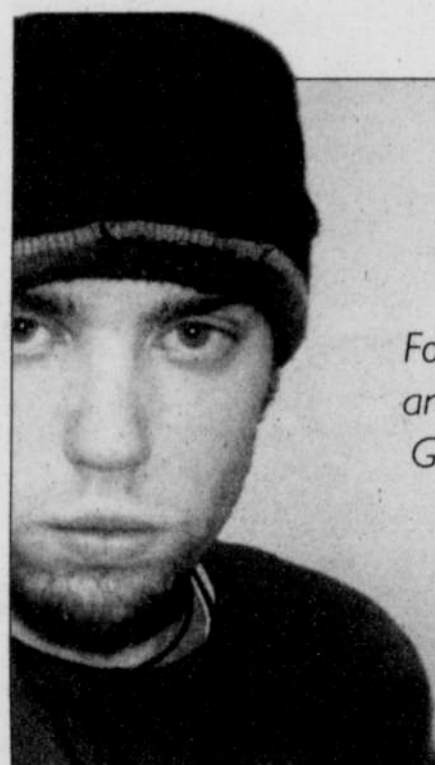
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Multnomah County Commissioner Maria Rojo de Steffey takes a moment for *Just Out*.

Dishing with Maria Rojo de Steffey

A candid commissioner discusses the chair race,
county credibility and her career

by Jaymee R. Cuti

A champion of queer causes, Maria Rojo de Steffey was re-elected as Multnomah County commissioner during the apex of the marriage equality controversy in May 2004. While seat is secure through 2008, she is still in the middle of the hotly contested county chair race. She has grabbed attention by boldly endorsing Ted Wheeler, challenger to her boss and marriage equality compatriot Diane Linn.

Bad blood between Linn and Rojo has spilled onto newspaper pages, leaked into radio sound bites and shaken the board's credibility.

But Rojo says the perceived drama is off her radar when she's faced with a stack of county business. She has recently focused on transportation and infrastructure issues such as bridges and the needs of queer elders and youth.

Jaymee R. Cuti: Where does your passion for queer civil rights stem from?

Maria Rojo de Steffey: I attended a board meeting, and there was a young man who came to speak and asked the commission to put more money into funding for the needs of gay young people. He told the story of his friend in high school who was a star athlete and an honor student, a great young man and his best friend. His friend came out to him; his friend was really troubled about it, and he said, "You should talk to your parents," and he said, "I don't have anyone to talk to except you." The young man ended up committing suicide. That day I walked around downtown crying, thinking: A child should not have to die because he is gay or she is a lesbian, or different in any way. That moved me so much that I thought, I'm going to work for gay, lesbian, trans issues forever. That's where my real passion came from.

JRC: Why do you advocate for Ted Wheeler as county chair, and why should queer Portlanders do the same?

MR: In making this decision of whether to support Ted, I spent a significant amount of time with him. I asked him a lot of questions, not only that relate to the queer community, but I tried to understand who he is and where he was coming from and why he had a passion for the kind of work that we do here. I was amazed and impressed with his answers. I got to know him as a real human being and a passionate, concerned human being—someone who loves this community with all his heart, someone who did get the issues. He is brilliant—he's kind of geeky, but brilliant. He's got the background for managing a business as well as the passion about and interest in the folks that we serve. He will also be very good at consensus building. He really will bring credibility back to the organization because we've lost some of that, as everyone knows.

JRC: Does the queer community owe loyalty to Diane Linn because of her accomplishments with same-sex marriage?

MR: The race for Multnomah County chair is not about same-sex marriage. Ted is not running against Diane about or because of this issue. He supports same-sex marriage just as Diane does. He is running because he believes he can do a better job at managing the county.

The queer community needs to look at the big picture of this job of managing a billion-dollar organization. This job is about understanding and working with the needs of all of the community, and the gay and lesbian community cares about jails, cares about our libraries, cares about the health services that we offer. They care about the needy kids in



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