



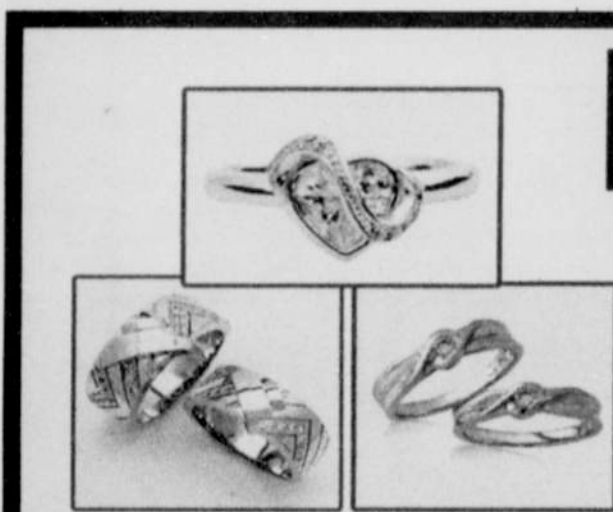
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## northwest

# Checking in with Ted Wheeler

Is the Multnomah County chair honoring his commitment?  
 by Julie Sabatier

**W**hen Multnomah County Chair Ted Wheeler ran for office against Diane Linn, he talked a lot about his commitment to queer rights, promising to stand up for equality at the state and county level. Now that he's been in office for about eight months, *Just Out* thought it was time to assess whether he is walking his talk.

Wheeler was a visible presence at the Portland Pride parade and the Red Dress Party, and he voiced his support for House Bill 2007 and Senate Bill 2, saying he wanted to hold hearings on the statewide legislation in Multnomah County. Leaders at Basic Rights Oregon, who endorsed Linn, declined Wheeler's offer.

"We felt it was important to keep our volunteers focused on talking with key swing legislators, all of whom were from districts outside Multnomah County," BRO's Melissa Chernaik explained. "We are really looking forward to working with Chair Wheeler to make sure folks in Multnomah County are educated about why it's important to vote yes on the referendum, should they be on the ballot in November 2008."

Wheeler indicated that he's open to supporting BRO in whatever way makes the most sense, although both he and the nonprofit were vague about what an effective educational campaign would entail.

Kendall Clawson was a bit more forthcoming about her hopes for the future. A transplant from Massachusetts, she took over as executive director for Q Center in June. The year-old community center does not receive any county funding.

"We've been talking for a little while now about the whole concept of a larger space for Q Center that has a joint tenancy with other queer organizations and businesses can collaborate with one another and perhaps have some sort of cornerstone business that can help support queer issues and activities," she explained. "Would they have a willingness to join in and participate in finding a building for us so that we don't have to do a massive capital campaign?"

The answer from Wheeler is a resounding and enthusiastic "maybe."

"I love the Q Center," he said. "At this time, the Q Center is not directly engaged in the delivery of social services, but if they decided to look in that direction as part of their new vision, I think there would be more opportunities for direct county support."

Portland City Commissioner Sam Adams also had some practical advice about how best to support the sexual minorities community at the county level. He suggested Wheeler emulate his Equal Benefits Ordinance, which requires all contractors who deal with the city to offer the same benefits to domestic partners as they do to spouses.

"I think that is the most tangible and doable reform that would provide real support for gay and



Barbara Willer (left) is the PRISM liaison for Multnomah County Chair Ted Wheeler.

lesbian families and their children," said Adams, who stressed that his comments were made to encourage rather than criticize Wheeler.

Wheeler himself was not available to comment on this specific point by press time. His deputy chief operating officer, Barbara Willer, had this to say: "We really haven't had that discussion with our board at this point."

Willer, a lesbian, also serves as Wheeler's liaison to Pride Respect and Integrity for Sexual Minorities (PRISM), a Multnomah County employee network group.

Within the larger queer population, there are special needs groups like queer seniors, served by organizations like Senior Housing and Retirement Enterprises and the Elder Resource Alliance, which is a part of the Friendly House senior program. Neither organization receives any direct county funding at this point.

"We would love for Elder Resource Alliance to be funded...but we've heard over and over again that isn't going to happen," said Friendly House executive director Vaune Albanese.

Willer said: "It sounds like they need to have a conversation with our program staff. We have a process for all our funding. They know that."

On the other end of the human spectrum is the Sexual Minority Youth Resource Center and Outside In, both of which praised Wheeler for his commitment to queer youth.

"He really gets it," said Outside In executive director Kathy Oliver. "Of course, I wish there were dedicated funds specifically for GLBTQ homeless youth."

Wheeler said that he would like to have more information about the specific funding needs of the young and queer homeless population but that there might be opportunities to partner with the city of Portland to provide financial resources.

Although Wheeler's openness to ideas from the queer community is commendable, it is worth noting that he didn't exactly begin this dialogue himself.

"I would encourage him if he really wants to do this, rather than doing it through a newspaper article, to invite a core group of queer leaders to come together and let's hammer out a plan and set a deadline for ourselves so we don't talk it to death," said Clawson. 10