

northwest

Next Stop, 2010

Concerned Oregonians group plots and plans for anti-gay ballot measures

by Stephen Marc Beaudoin

They're back. After licking its wounds from a round of defeats this past spring and summer, the state's far-right conservative anti-gay organization, Concerned Oregonians, is up off the mat and ready for another round in the ring.

And just days after a transformational U.S. election that offered both hope (Sen. Barack Obama's victory as 44th president) and defeat (the passage of California's same-sex marriage ban) for the sexual minorities community, the group is promising a gloves-off bloody ballot measure fight, the likes of which Oregon has not seen since 2004's ugly Measure 36 campaign, which amended the state's constitution to define marriage as between one man and one woman.

According to e-mail communications from Concerned Oregonians' new executive director, Craig Myers, the organization is "rapidly expanding" its brain trust in communications and fund raising, consulting with a coterie of conservative Republican current and former Oregon legislators with anti-gay leanings and reaching out to like-minded right-wing leaders in coalition-building.

Myers also says his organization is weeks away from officially launching renewed efforts to repeal two landmark civil rights laws for queer Oregonians.

Already, the state's flagship gay rights organization, Basic Rights Oregon, is bracing itself for a potentially expensive and brutal ballot measure fight two years from now, warning supporters not to become complacent after a string of Nov. 4 victories in critical state races (see Page 14).

The ballot measure fight is a revived effort to repeal two laws, enacted in 2008, that provide protections, responsibilities and rights to sexual minorities: the Oregon Equality Act, which bans public and workplace discrimination based on perceived or actual sexual orientation and gender identity, and the Oregon Family Fairness Act, which offers a panoply of rights and responsibilities to same-sex couples under the name "domestic partnerships."

Since the laws passed, some of Oregon's most notorious conservative leaders have lobbied attacks to block or repeal them. Former state Sen. Marilyn Shannon, R-Brookings, led a lusty statewide campaign in the fall of 2007 to refer both



From left, Gene Derfler, Jeff Kubler, Kevin Mannix and Perry Atkinson: The faces behind anti-gay ballot measures planned for 2010.

laws to the 2008 ballot, but failed to gather the requisite number of signatures. A dramatic 11th-hour federal case brought by the Alliance Defense Fund briefly stayed the implementation of the Oregon Family Fairness Act, but District Judge Michael Mosman eventually ruled against the conservative out-of-state legal collective, and domestic partnerships began Feb. 4.

Myers' group finds both laws offensive and against the spirit of religious freedoms that he says Oregon's laws protect. In an Oct. 25 e-mail, he decried the laws as "designed to mandate public acceptance of gay, transgender and bisexual lifestyles." Last spring his organization launched three rapid-fire initiative petitions to put the laws before voters on the November 2008 ballot; because of prolonged legal appeals from BRO and the American Civil Liberties Union, all of them failed to reach even the circulation stage.

Longtime Portland civil rights attorney Charlie Hinkle was involved as legal counsel representing BRO on those legal appeals. He acknowledged that although conservative anti-gay causes "can raise money and raise the temperature" of the conversa-

tion in their fights, he's unfazed by these renewed efforts to put gay rights laws up for public vote. "I think if the opponents of the domestic partnership law try to bring this back on the ballot, Oregonians will slam the door on them," he said.

But Myers' earlier failings aren't stopping his group from fanning anti-gay flames. After longtime director David Crowe, a stalwart of the state's anti-gay movement and former foot soldier in Lon Mabon's Oregon Citizens Alliance revolution, resigned from the group, Myers has poured fresh energy and resources into reviving its efforts. He has also held closed-door strategy sessions with the likes of former Oregon Senate Majority Leader Gene Derfler, R-Salem; perennial conservative candidate Kevin Mannix; media relations specialists like Jeff Kubler; and Christian radio broadcaster Perry Atkinson, former Oregon Republican Party chairman, to best plot his group's next lines of attack.

"The political barriers which must be overcome...presents a huge challenge," Myers admitted in his message to supporters. "Yet, the passage of Measure 36 in 2004, by 1,028,000 voters," he concluded, "illustrates that it can be done." **10**

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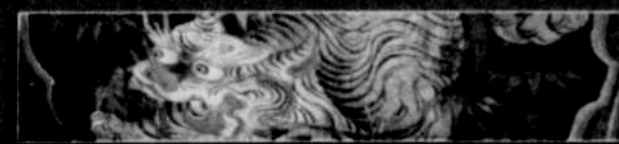
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