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Labor Lobbyist

AFSCME's Mary Botkin has been traveling the halls of Salem for 24 years working on behalf of public employees.

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Friday, Feb. 16, 6:30 a.m.: It's still dark. Mary Botkin, tall and silver-haired, climbs into her black Ford Explorer outside her Southeast Portland home.

"I'm nervous," she says.

Botkin is Oregon's most experienced labor lobbyist, with a 24-year record of representing the public employees union Oregon Council 75 of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees at the Legislature. She's known nearly every Oregon lawmaker going back two decades, and a great many figures in local and national Democratic Party circles.

But today is important to her.

"I've been trying to get this bill passed for 20 years," Botkin says.



Mary Botkin (center) talks with Multnomah County Commissioner Lonnie Roberts at a community forum.

The bill, HB 2401, would give 911 dispatchers with 25 years of service an early retirement option — with reduced benefits. At no extra cost to the government, emergency operators weary of "carnage, car crashes, and crank calls" could call it quits after a quarter-century.

But 10 separate Oregon Legislatures have declined to pass it.

At 3 p.m., the bill will get its first committee hearing in the new Democratic-controlled Oregon House.

Emergency operators — AFSCME members — will be coming to the State Capitol to testify alongside her. If committee members are persuaded, they'll send the bill to the full House and recommend its passage.

One minute and two stoplights down the road, Botkin pulls over. AFSCME lobbyist Joe Baessler gets in. The two live six blocks apart, and share the 98-mile Portland-Salem round-trip.

Baessler, 31, is Case Western Reserve Law School Class of 2000. Botkin, 59, is Jefferson High School Class of 1966. But he's learning from her, because it's his first session as a lobbyist, and her 12th.

Botkin first went to Salem in 1977 as a legislative aide to State Rep. Rod Monroe. She worked briefly as a committee staffer for Bill Bradbury, who was then a committee chair in the Oregon Senate. Cecil Tibbetts, executive director of AFSCME's statewide council, hired her as a full-time lobbyist.

On the drive down, Botkin and Baessler compare notes and talk tactics. At the hearing, they're going to play recordings of 911 calls for the committee — "fatals," Botkin calls them. There's a mobile home fire and a shotgun suicide. Will the recordings help them get their point across?

Botkin has long been assigned to defend the interests of public safety and corrections officers, and is fiercely protective of them. She's been known to go to the mat for a minor work rule, or call in all her chits to get an unjustly-fired worker reinstated.

At 7:20 a.m., Botkin pulls up outside the Capitol building and parks in a handicapped spot. She was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 1975, but it's in remission now, and she uses it, jokingly, as an excuse when she forgets things.

Botkin wants to check for messages, and heads to Room 40 in the basement. The sign at the entrance says "Capitol Club

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Teamsters blast plan to open border to Mexican trucks

WASHINGTON, D.C. — The Bush Administration announced Feb. 23 it intends to open the U.S. border to Mexican trucks in the next six to eight weeks for a one-year experimental pilot program.

The announcement drew harsh reactions from organized labor, especially the Teamsters Union.

"As with the Dubai Ports debacle, President Bush is willing to risk our national security by giving unfettered access to America's transportation infrastructure to foreign companies and their government sponsors," said Jim Hoffa, Teamsters general president. "They are playing a game of Russian Roulette on America's highways."

The Teamsters Union has led efforts to keep the border closed since the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which called for opening

borders to the trucking industries of Mexico, Canada and the United States.

President Bill Clinton blocked cross-border trucking because of concerns that Mexico's trucks weren't safe.

However, in 2004, the U.S. Supreme Court rejected a lawsuit brought by labor and environmental groups to stop implementation of the open-border trucking policy because of the Mexican government's failure to meet the truck safety and driver training requirements of NAFTA.

The border has remained closed, except for transfers within a 20-mile commercial zone in the U.S.

"Mexico refuses to meet their end of the bargain, yet President Bush rewards them with open access to American highways," Hoffa said. "It is the American driving public who will pay the consequences."

Two years ago, the Department of

Transportation inspector general found that the Mexican government and Mexican motor carriers did not meet congressionally-mandated requirements. An inspector general audit report is due in the next couple of months, raising serious questions as to why President Bush is pushing this experimental program ahead of that report, the Teamsters Union said.

"Where is the inspector general's report that tells us that Mexico is meeting U.S. standards?" Hoffa asked. "Why is the president willing to move forward when his own inspector general has stated that Mexico cannot meet its obligations?"

The Bush Administration plans to open a one-year experimental program that will allow 100 Mexican carriers to begin travel beyond the currently permitted commercial zones. Supposedly no hazardous material shipments will

be permitted in order to avoid the required background checks.

The Department of Transportation did not say how many trucks will be participating in the experiment or whether there will be a system in place to differentiate between those trucks traveling to the 20-mile commercial zones and those permitted to travel throughout the United States.

Mexico exported \$198 billion in goods to the U.S. last year, with more than 80 percent shipped by truck. As it stands, Mexican truckers are required to transfer cargo to U.S. carriers within the border zone.

U.S. Sen. Patty Murray, (D-Wash.), chair of the Appropriations Subcommittee on Transportation, will hold a hearing March 8 to determine whether the Bush Administration has met safety requirements Congress set earlier.

When the Administration first pro-

posed opening the U.S. border to long-haul Mexican trucks without adequate safety standards, it set off a firestorm in Congress, Murray said.

The House voted to prohibit cross-border trucking outright, and President Bush threatened to veto it.

Murray authored a bipartisan compromise requiring dozens of new safety requirements to ensure that cross-border trucking would not pose a risk to the American public.

"The Bush Administration and Mexican authorities now maintain that they have fulfilled every one of these safety requirements. That remains to be seen," Murray said.

Oregon U.S. Congressman Peter DeFazio told Bloomberg News that he questioned how Mexico will oversee driver drug testing and monitor driver fatigue, since Mexico doesn't require truckers to keep trip logs.