

Portland City Council takes baby steps toward health care mandate for construction workers on city jobs

By DON McINTOSH
Associate Editor

In a surprise culmination to a year and a half of on-again, off-again meetings with several union leaders, Portland City Commissioner Sam Adams introduced a council resolution Aug. 22 that was almost nothing like what had been discussed.

Operating Engineers Local 701 Stationary Coordinator Cherry Harris and Laborers organizer Ben Nelson had been pushing Adams and his aides to introduce a "pay or play" ordinance that would require construction contractors that do business with the city to pay into a city fund for uninsured construction workers if they didn't provide family health insurance to their employees.

But the resolution Adams introduced Aug. 22 at a packed special evening council session was an open-ended commitment to an affordable Health Care Strategy, "so that employers have more options and can better offer health care to their employees and their families." In other words, the city would do something to provide low-cost insurance to its contractors, on a voluntary basis.

As a result, the packed, two-hour hearing had an air of unreality as over a dozen people seemingly testified about an ordinance that wasn't the one being introduced.



Operating Engineers Local 701 Stationary Coordinator Cherry Harris testifies at Portland City Council as Father Chuck Leinert of St. Andrews Catholic Church looks on.

The "pay or play" idea, which backers referred to as the "Community Health and Best Value Ordinance," had the support of Operating Engineers, Laborers, Carpenters, and Service Employees, and the community coalition they belong to — the Metropolitan Alliance for Common Good (MACG). At MACG's request, City Council scheduled the hearing in the evening so working people could attend, and

council chambers filled up to the second floor gallery with supporters.

Opponents also testified at the hearing, however, including a representative of Associated General Contractors and several members of the National Association of Minority Contractors (NAMCO).

Adams introduced the issue, holding up a copy of that day's Oregonian newspaper, with a front page headline reporting that the number of uninsured Oregonians was way up. Adams said

the plight of the uninsured hit home with him personally; uninsured as a young man, he had an appendicitis that led to personal bankruptcy.

"We've been working on this ever since Cherry Harris and I sat down to breakfast two years ago," Adams recounted at the hearing. "Cherry said, 'Why the heck don't you do something about health care?' I said, 'Well, I'll try.'"

Adams assigned several staff members to meet with Harris and Nelson and their MACG allies. They worked for months on several versions of the "pay or play" concept, which is intended both to make sure contracted workers are insured *and* to prevent "low-road" employers from outcompeting employers that provide insurance.

But the week before the scheduled hearing, Adams got pressure from contractors, and in behind-the-scenes meetings, presented Harris and Nelson with an entirely different proposal, crafted by André Baugh, a consultant to minority contractors. That proposal focused on how the city could help contractors afford insurance, rather than requiring them to do so. The resolution that was introduced was a reworked version of that proposal.

Still, witnesses at the hearing were talking about the "best value ordinance" that had been scuttled. Several testified about how union health benefits had saved their lives and homes.

"I am a cancer survivor," said Stuart Fishman, a member of United Food

and Commercial Workers Local 555, "and I know that without union health coverage, I would have lost my house and everything else."

James Posey, president of the Oregon chapter of NAMCO, spoke against the "best value" proposal. "This is not about health care," Posey said. "This about empowering unions."

Mayor Tom Potter and Commissioner Dan Saltzman were away on vacation. Adams' resolution passed that night, 3-0, with support from Commissioners Randy Leonard, and Erik Sten.

It chiefly sets up further meetings on the subject. Under the resolution, the City will hire a health care consultant to gather information on uninsured contractors and workers. The consultant will present alternatives by Feb. 1, 2008 to an 11-person committee stacked heavily against the unions that originated the "pay or play" proposal that got the discussion going to begin with. That committee will have only one representative from labor, and one from MACG, plus others, including AGC, NAMCO, the Small Business Advisory Council, the Oregon Association of Hospitals and Health Systems, Portland Development Commission, Portland Bureau of Purchasing, the City attorney, and the Multnomah County Health Department

The committee is tasked with making a recommendation to City Council by March 1, 2008, followed by a series of town hall meetings.

...Building Trades convention

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state; and Ben Westlund, who likely will leave the Senate to run for state treasurer. Walker was actively campaigning, while Westlund said he would make an official announcement in mid-September.

"I'm made of pure grit," Walker said, noting that if elected secretary of state she would focus more attention on the Audits Division. "I love getting the bad guys. Audits are right up my alley," she said.

In general business, Clif Davis, the newly-elected business manager of Electrical Workers Local 48, was elected

to the Executive Board of the Oregon State Building Trades Council.

The Council gave a \$500 scholarship to Aurora VanGarde of Gresham. Aurora, the daughter of Richard VanGarde of Plumbers and Fitters Local 290, will attend Oregon State University.

A \$750 scholarship funded by Ferguson Wellman Capital Management was presented to Brain Ratliff, the son of IBEW Local 48 member Chris Ratliff of Hood River. Brian is a sophomore at Oregon State.

Winners are selected by the governor based on an application and short essay.

Panel will measure use of academic part-timers

American Federation of Teachers-Oregon counted a small victory Aug. 28 in its years-long campaign against overuse of part-time college faculty.

Oregon Governor Ted Kulongoski signed an executive order creating a "Postsecondary Quality Education Commission" that will try to answer the question: "What level of funding would be needed for Oregon to have a high-quality state college and university system?"

In the last decade, higher education has been the State of Oregon's ugly stepchild, last in line for dinner. Tuition has risen to the point that many young Oregonians can't afford to attend public colleges.

On the new commission's task list is something AFT has sought in Salem since at least 1999 — a study of just how much universities and community colleges use part-time faculty. Anecdotally, AFT has seen a steady shift away from permanent full-time tenure-track faculty and toward

term-to-term and part-time low-wage and low-benefit instructors.

And that harms students, not just AFT members, says Rob Wagner, AFT-Oregon Director of Political and Legislative Affairs. The union pushed a bill this year in the Oregon Legislature that would have phased in a 25 percent cap on the use of part-timers and required that part-timers get pro-rated pay and benefits and first crack at full-time positions. But the bill didn't go anywhere.

Among other things, the new commission will study the impact of the use of part-time faculty and graduate student employees on program quality and student success. If it completes its study in time for the Legislature's 2009 session, AFT might have hard numbers to back up its arguments to lawmakers.

Members of the commission hadn't been named as of press time.

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