

Oregon's initiative system in need of some repairs

By JOE BAESSLER

A recent Portland City Club report that calls for overhauling Oregon's initiative and referendum system has, predictably, created a maelstrom of comments from both friends and foes of the current way of doing things. Those who think the system is just fine the way it is accuse "special interests" of trying to sabotage the system. Many who agree with the report want wholesale changes immediately. Surely there must be some reasonable middle ground.

Few can argue that Oregon's initiative and referendum system is, in 2007, nothing like Oregon's founding fathers had in mind. Right or wrong, things have changed. True "grass-roots" initiative campaigns are few and far between. People like Bill Sizemore

and Kevin Mannix have created cottage industries out of placing initiatives on the ballot. While their supporters are among the first to decry that "special interests" want to emasculate the current system, it's an ironic fact that Sizemore — in particular — has become a virtual special interest unto himself.

It is true that our organization — the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) — has had historical concerns about abuses within the current system. Given the high number of initiatives that Sizemore has aimed directly at public employees, can you blame us? Yet we have never called for abolishing Oregon's revered initiative system. We do believe the system has warranted occasional tweaks over time.

Case in point: In the mid- to late-1990s, it became apparent that the entire signature gathering system was running amok. Initiatives had become such big business that those in the signature-gathering field were tempted to cheat. So we played a major role in two bills that reformed — not eliminated — the process. As a result, current Oregon law says you must pay signature gatherers by the hour, rather than on a per signature (or "bounty") basis. We were also key backers of HB 3053 in the 1999 Oregon Legislature that brought a scientifically valid for-



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mula to the method by which initiative signatures are verified. And in 2007, we helped champion HB 2082, which simply requires chief petitioners that pay signature gatherers to register those gatherers. All of these laws are reasonable checks and balances to ensure that the "John Hancock" on initiative petition sheets indeed belong to John Hancock.

The Portland City Club report is 76 pages long. We don't agree with every word or every recommendation. But we do believe the report should be required reading for the 2009 Oregon Legislature. It is completely reason-

able for that body to review the current system and debate if and where fixes are needed.

We'd also like to add one idea to the mix that's not included in the city club report. In Nevada, there is a process for that state's Supreme Court to review potentially unconstitutional initiatives before they're placed before voters. This is an option Oregon should strongly consider. How many times have we seen divisive campaigns over initiatives here that end up in court, only to be ultimately thrown out as unconstitutional? Where is the down side in determining the question of constitutionality before people on either side of an issue invest time, money and energy either supporting or fighting a measure? It doesn't matter what your political persuasion is — liberal, conservative, moderate or otherwise — you feel "cheated" if your cause passes a vote of the people only to be struck down after the fact by a court. And while such judicial review is an appropriate piece of our check-and-balance form of government, there's much to be gained and little to be lost by moving judicial review to the front end of the process.

(Joe Baessler is a Political Coordinator for Oregon AFSCME Council 75.)

Klare's column will be missed

To The Editor:

Subscribers to the Northwest Labor Press will sincerely miss its icon, Gene Klare's column "Let Me Say This About That."

Gene has played a major role in reporting and commenting on the unions and its members in this area both as a columnist and as editor of the newspaper.

In all the jobs he has worked in, he has shown outstanding talents. His last column outlined many of his accomplishments — from the infamous Oregonian strike and helping to start the labor-supported Reporter newspaper.

Let me assure you that's only the tip of the story. He's done so much more.

We will miss his column very much.

Nellie Fox Edwards
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More retirees sought to build Alliance For Retired Americans

To the Editor:

Everyone says 2008 will be a landmark year for America. After eight years under a regime that has decimated the middle class, violated the Constitution, and reversed much of the social and political progress of the last 70 years, people are starting to remember the issues they used to care about. Labor needs to capitalize on this reawakening. This could be the year.

You may have heard that the Alliance for Retired Americans was formed with this in mind, but do you understand why? It's not hard to explain. It's the doing that's been difficult.

The problem stems from the numbers. Historically, large numbers of union retirees are never heard from back at the hall or lodge once they no longer work for an income. But there were always the members born between 1946 and 1966. That's no longer the case. Large numbers of Baby Boomers are beginning to retire everywhere in America, including in the labor community. That spells trouble.

The notion of "Big Labor" has always been a myth. Union membership has been in decline for more than three decades, but the damage done to labor's power since Ronald Reagan crushed the air traffic controllers union

in 1981 has put us on life support. Labor needs retirees to organize themselves across turf lines; join in working coalitions with people holding similar political views; make their collective voice heard by municipal, county, state, and federal elected officials, and show the newer generations of union members why the wages and benefits are as good as they are.

Right now, only the Alliance for Retired Americans, with three dozen states on board and more to come, is taking on that task. That's why I'm urging ALL unions in Oregon to send one of their soon-to-retire members to our Western Regional Conference in Las Vegas March 24-26. Retirees and older working people (blue-collar, white-collar, and no-collar) from 12 Western states — including such left-wing labor bastions as New Mexico, Montana, and Colorado — will be learning from and teaching each other what retirement security is all about and what we all must do to protect it.

Please contact me at vvjporter@aol.com or 503-284-8591 if you want to hear more. It's crucial. We must join together. America may never be the same if we don't.

Verna Porter
President
Alliance for Retired Americans
Portland

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