

AFSCME leaders help break ground on new State Hospital

By **DON LOVING**

SALEM – “Overdue” was the word of the day on Sept. 3 as over 100 people gathered for the groundbreaking ceremonies for a new Oregon State Hospital (OSH).

The history of OSH is well-chronicled. As noted by several speakers, the now ancient facility on Center Street NE in central Salem was both state-of-the-art and located well outside of town when it was constructed in 1883. Originally known as the Oregon Insane Asylum, it was renamed in 1907.

Unfortunately, the facility is perhaps best known for hosting the 1973 film “One Flew Over The Cuckoo’s Nest,” starring Jack Nicholson. OSH was chosen for the movie because it looked old and out-of-date then; indeed, a 1978 governor’s task force concluded that OSH was “aged, obsolete, unsafe and visibly deteriorating from years of neglect.” Again, that report was issued in 1978, and improvements in the intervening 30 years have been few and far between.

The ongoing situation at OSH has long been a concern for Oregon AFSCME Council 75, as the union has two locals within the facility. Local 3295 represents registered nurses at the hospital, while Local 3327 represents OSH doctors. A combination of the deteriorating physical facility and chronic understaffing has made OSH an extremely dangerous place to work; there are frequent patient-on-staff and patient-on-patient assaults and other situations that the union has doggedly called to the attention of the Oregon Legislature session after session.



Amongst those posing for the ceremonial groundbreaking at Oregon State Hospital are (left to right) state Sen. Peter Courtney, DHS Director Dr. Bruce Goldberg, AFSCME Local 3295 President Joe Thurman, AFSCME Local 3327 President Dr. Lorraine Skatch, and Oregon AFSCME Council 75 Executive Director Ken Allen.

Shortly after taking office in 2003, Gov. Ted Kulongoski established a 21-member Mental Health Task Force to study and identify the key problems in Oregon’s overall mental health system. Quickly bubbling to the top was OSH. Finally, in 2007, the Legislature approved a package that includes a new 620-bed facility on the

current OSH grounds in Salem, plus an additional 360-bed satellite facility to be constructed in Junction City. There are about 800 beds at the current OSH site in Salem. If all goes as planned, the new Salem OSH will open in 2011, with the Junction City facility following in 2013.

“Welcome to a ceremony that is exciting but

long overdue,” said Dr. Bruce Goldberg, director of the Oregon Department of Human Services, in greeting those in attendance on Sept. 3.

Salem Mayor Janet Taylor, Kulongoski, and Oregon Senate President Peter Courtney all used similar phrases during their speeches.

Among the 20 or so dignitaries on the podium dais were Oregon AFSCME Executive Director Ken Allen, Local 3295 President Joe Thurman, and Local 3327 President Dr. Lorraine Skatch. Both Thurman and Skatch, who work at OSH, were cautiously optimistic about the future.

“It’s long overdue, and hopefully we’ve begun some momentum that doesn’t stop,” said Thurman, an OSH employee for 11 years. “This is all well and good, but a new facility doesn’t solve all the problems here. It will help, but there are still safety concerns due to lack of staffing. We can build a shiny new hospital, but if we don’t staff it properly, we’ll inherit many of the old problems. We need to make sure that both staff and patients are safe at OSH day in and day out.”

Skatch echoed Thurman’s comments.

“It’s very exciting, and a great day for Oregon and for Oregonians with mental illnesses,” said Skatch, who’s been at OSH for 22 years. “I hope this change leads to better living situations and better treatment for the patients of Oregon State Hospital and those who work with them day-to-day.”

(Editor’s Note: Don Loving is communications director for Oregon AFSCME Council 75.)

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