

Sen. Ron Wyden confronted about Israel Anti-Boycott Act at local town hall



Sen. Ron Wyden held a town hall at Wilson High School on Aug. 5. (Photo by Lyndsey Hewitt, Pamplin Media Group)

By Erik Vidstrand
The Southwest Portland Post

U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden (D-Oregon) made his Multnomah County town hall visit to Wilson High School on Aug. 5. Wyden was introduced by Rep. Margaret Doherty (D-35).

“Senator Wyden has kept his pledge of holding town halls in every Oregon county each year,” Doherty said. “This is unprecedented.”

This is the 55th town hall of the year. Nearly 300 community members

and elected officials packed the auditorium.

“Political change doesn’t come from the top down, it’s bottom up,” Wyden said. “That’s why it’s so important for members of Congress to get out into the communities they represent and hear directly from their constituents.”

And with that, Wyden answered questions drawn by lottery. He said that there were no subjects off limits.

The first question addressed entitlements such as Social Security and Medicare running out of money.

“Medicare of today is not the Medicare it once was,” Wyden said. “Increase in cancer, diabetes, heart disease, stroke, and other chronic diseases are all causing costs to rise.

“Prescription drugs are also skyrocketing. We need to update the Medicare guarantee. It is not a voucher program.

“Ten thousand people turn 65 every day who become eligible for Medicare. I am all for raising the wage base of Social Security contributions. Let’s just be careful and hope we do that without affecting small business owners.”

By far the most compelling topic of the event was the many questions on S.720, the Israel Anti-Boycott Act. Wyden is one of 46 co-sponsors. This bill declares that Congress oppose the United Nations Human Rights Council resolution of March 24, 2016, which urges countries to pressure companies to divest from, or break contracts with, Israel.

The council targeted Israel with a commercial boycott, calling for the establishment of a database, such as a “blacklist”, of companies that operate, or have business relations with entities that operate, beyond Israel’s 1949 armistice lines, including East Jerusalem.

Opponents of the bill were scattered throughout the auditorium holding up placards stating “I support Palestinian rights” and yelling various comments to Wyden’s answers. Outside, a Palestinian flag flew.

A flyer, created by the American Civil Liberties Union, claimed that the proposed federal legislation attempts to criminalize the boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) campaign for Palestinian rights.

The ACLU claims the bill would punish business owners and individuals based solely on their point of view and such a penalty is in direct violation of the First Amendment.

“I do not take a back seat to anyone on protecting the first amendment,” Wyden said.

A follow-up question immediately brought up the topic again.

“The ACLU has interpreted this bill as unconstitutional,” the audience member stated, “and your support of it threatens free speech. We urge you

to remove your name as a co-sponsor of this bill.”

“Exercise your rights to protest any way you can,” Wyden said.

A question addressing healthcare was next.

“Section 1332 of the Affordable Care Act,” Wyden said, “permits a state to apply for a state innovation waiver to pursue innovative strategies for providing their residents with access to high quality, affordable health insurance while retaining the basic protections of the ACA.”

“The biggest challenge of single-payer,” Wyden said, “is how do you get there from here? We spend more than \$3 trillion a year on health care. We’re not spending it in the right places.”

Wyden was asked about preserving public lands. He replied that he doesn’t support the administration’s intention of reducing public land. Wyden recommended a grassroots movement to challenge the potential changes.

Wyden answered questions about large, private contributions infiltrating politics and Russia meddling into national elections.

“According to the Supreme Court,” Wyden said, “there should be no limits on campaign donations, initiated by Citizens United.”

The U.S. Supreme Court held that freedom of speech prohibits government from restricting independent political expenditures by nonprofit and nonprofit corporations, labor unions, and other associations.

“Donors should at least be required to post campaign donations online,” said Wyden. “It would take a constitutional amendment to overturn this decision.”

“There are national voter suppression tactics. You can see it on TV,” he said. “People wait in the heat, or are told they are not going to the right polling place.”

Wyden has been urging Congress to look at vote-by-mail nationally which makes it much easier to vote and comes with a paper trail.

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 Graphic Design.....Lisa Kind, Leslie Baird
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 Circulation.....Rick Hepper

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The Post has a circulation of 7,000 in Multnomah Village and the surrounding neighborhood business districts including Burlingame, Capitol Hill, Garden Home, Glen Cullen, Hillsdale, South Portland, Raleigh Hills, West Portland and Vermont Hills. The Post is published on or about the 1st of every month. Back issues are \$2.50 each when available. All major credit cards accepted.

The Post is printed on recycled newsprint using soy-based inks.