

By the grace of Margaret Carter

As co-chair of the state Ways and Means Committee the veteran senator is in a push-pull battle in Salem to preserve funding for Oregon's most vulnerable

BY MARA GRUNBAUM
 STAFF WRITER

State Sen. Margaret Carter has a front seat in Oregon's budget process this year: the seven-term Portland democrat is serving as co-chair of the Joint Ways and Means Committee, which makes budget and revenue decisions.

A former teacher and counselor, and herself a single mother of nine, Carter, now 73, says she has personal perspective on the struggles of low-income Oregonians: "Been there, experienced that." In her Senate post, she has advocated for women and minorities, schools and housing equity. The recommended budget that she and Co-Chair Rep. Peter Buckley released May 18 restores many of the human services that Gov. Ted Kulongoski suggested cutting, but it also relies on the Legislature approving \$800 million in new tax revenue.

Carter spoke to Street Roots from Salem about her take on the budget process and the challenges still ahead this session.

"I want the revenue package to pass so that we don't have such high incidences of having to cut people off welfare, and then they fall through the cracks because they have no other place to go. They absolutely have no other place to go."

Mara Grunbaum: *How do you prioritize funding in an extremely poor financial situation?*

Margaret Carter: It's been quite a challenging time — challenging in the sense that resources are needed in order to do this budget and to do it in a way by which the most vulnerable are not sacrificed. The money is not here, and the only means we have of trying to get some money is by sending a revenue package to the people. History has shown us that that's not always a good way to do it, because the people usually have turned down the measures. [In 2004, a similar tax package was overturned by public referendum.] If the measures don't pass, it will force us back into session in February. Maybe in February, we will have no choice but to cut it. It's challenging, to say the least.

M.G.: *What did you have to sacrifice in the budget you came up with?*

M.C.: There are a lot of things that I wish we could have done differently. I wish we could have given more money to seniors and people with disabilities. I'm hopeful that those (revenue) measures pass so that we won't have to close schools. I'm hopeful that they'll pass so that our court system will stay open.

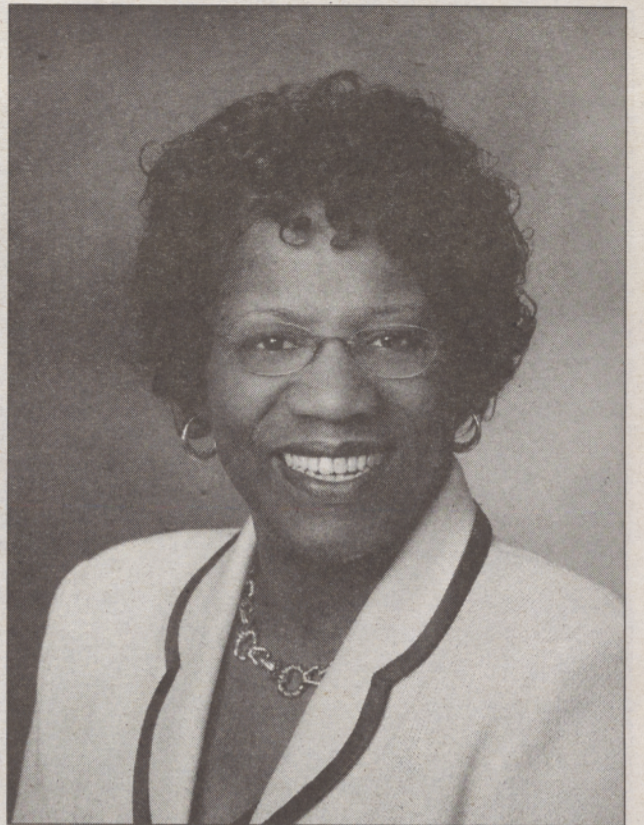
M.G.: *What's still ahead?*

M.C.: (One thing) up for discussion now is how we manage to pay for employment-related day care — women who are trying to make ends meet while staying a member of the work force. That's a very, very important thing to have happen. Because many young parents, young women say, "I want to be able to make it on my own, to go to school and become independent — that's the only way that I'm going to be able to make it." Because of the cost of day care, it's hard to do that. Not being able to work forces them into a lifestyle where they are relying on the state.

If we can find other resources, I'd like to be able to give money to young women. I remember being a single mom, and as a single mom I didn't have anyone to help me with children. Except for being able to have some opportunity through the state, I would not have made it to be where I am today. But I was able to do that because there was opportunity for me then, and I'd like to be able to pass on that same level of opportunity through the graciousness of the taxpayers of this state.

M.G.: *How do you avoid ending up in the same place, having to make more drastic cuts, in another two years?*

M.C.: We have a tax system that does not effectively allow us to have any kind of consistency in how we do business. Every time we have a downfall in the economy, we don't have a rainy-day fund. If we were able to take the kicker and put that into a rainy-day fund, then we would have opportunity to maximize not having to close our schools and everything else when we run into these kinds of downturns. When you run into these kinds of downturns, the people that are low-income are impacted the most. The welfare rolls are increased, and at the same



time, we are trying to make ends meet, and we can't do it because so many people are laid off.

M.G.: *If the financial situation does improve, how do you make sure that those low-income people who've fallen the farthest — been laid off, lost their homes or fallen out of the service system — aren't left out of the recovery?*

M.C.: We can't ensure that without some new revenue on the table. New revenue on the table means that we then can help our most vulnerable, but short-of new revenue, we aren't going to be able to do it.

First of all, the national economists have said that we're not going to see a change in the national economy until about September of 2010. If that happens, that means that the economic marketplace is not going to change, and we are still going to have high levels of unemployment.

If the people say no to this revenue package that we're sending out, that means we've got to go back in and cut more, and you can believe that a lot of people are going to suffer at the hands of this budget.

I want the revenue package to pass so that we don't have such high incidences of having to cut people off welfare, and then they fall through the cracks because they have no other place to go. They absolutely have no other place to go.

This is a time that we as Oregonians are all in this together. I am definitely going to be doing all I can to make a difference in the lives of those who cannot help themselves except but by the grace of God.

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