



PHOTO BY ELISABETH NEELY

Bob Sallinger prepares to release a red-tailed hawk back to the wild on New Years Day.

The nature of politics

Portland Audubon Society's Conservation Director Bob Sallinger talks about controversial political moves that could have serious consequences for the region's environmental landscape

BY JASMINE ROCKOW
STAFF WRITER

The Audubon Society has long recognized that if you want to measure the quality of our environment on Earth, you have to cast your eyes to the skies.

As a result, the Portland chapter of the organization has pioneered environmental conservation across land and water for more than a century in Oregon, despite challenges that span industrial expansion and political machinations.

Most recently, the Audubon Society has joined forces with a host of environmental organizations to oppose an initiative that seeks to remove the Portland Water Bureau from city control and place it under an independently elected board. If enough signatures are collected voters will see the measure on the November 2014 ballot.

Portland Audubon Society Conservation Director Bob Sallinger doesn't mince words on the issue. Sallinger calls the Portland People's Water Trust a Trojan Horse backed by corporate interests and environmental polluters seeking to gain power in city politics.

Most importantly, he says, the water initiative drains time, money and resources that should be devoted to Portland's more pressing environmental issues, like the Comprehensive Plan Update and Sen. Ron Wyden's recently unveiled timber bill.

Jasmine Rockow: *Do you think the Water Initiative is going to pass?*

Bob Sallinger: I don't know. We're certainly fighting it hard. Every

conservation group that works in Portland is opposing it. There's huge grassroots opposition to this measure, so hopefully people will figure out what it's really all about. Right now, the measure is feeding on anger towards government and frustration about specific things the city council has done, and it is using that anger to promote an initiative that will be incredibly disruptive. But, I hope the people will see through that.

Making the ballot is one challenge, passing an initiative is another. We're confident that people will take a hard look at it and realize who's behind it and what it's all about. When that happens people will very quickly have second thoughts.

Not a single grassroots or community organization has come out in support of it except for Friends of the Reservoirs, which is really a single-issue group.

As far as we can tell from their website and from their contributions reports, this is pretty much exclusively backed by big industrial and corporate entities. I think people of Portland will realize very quickly that this measure that purports to protect the public from the big corporate entities is actually being backed by these very same big corporate entities. I am hopeful that people will see through it and realize that there's an incredible amount to lose.

Unfortunately, we do have somewhat cynical times. People are frustrated with government in general, frustrated with some things that the Portland city government has done. And I'm certainly no apologist for the City of Portland. I have probably spent as much time as anybody fighting with the City of Portland on issues.

Whether we're talking about Superfund or River Plan or Hayden Island — there have been a number of environmental battles here that have occurred over the years.

But if you want to reform city government, or any government, there's an effective way to do it and an ineffective way to do it. Throwing your lot in with the industrial polluters in order to protect our communities from big industrial polluters is just pretty ass-backwards.

J.R.: *In editorials you have talked about how the board is much more obscure. It sounds like there's not as much opportunity for people to voice concerns, if they even become aware of them.*

B.S.: Just below the surface of it, what you find is that all of the rhetoric they are using to promote this thing — they're actually the people that we need to be protected from. City government has its challenges, but these big corporate entities have not been able to elect their candidates. Again and again, big industrial interests and big business interests in Portland have lost city council elections. That's not to say they don't have too much influence, but those elections are very carefully followed by the public.

City Council is publicly accessible in terms of having hearings and they are very well attended. I was at the budget hearings last year when upwards of 500 people showed up for a hearing. They don't always do what we want them to do and they don't always do the right thing, but people tend to know who the city commissioners are and who their mayor is. They tend to know

where to find them and there tends to be a lot of watch dogs tracking their behavior.

When you talk about a district, how many people can name the members of the Port commission, the planning commission, the soil and water conservation districts or judges? The reality is that most people have no idea who they are voting for when the ballots come for these more obscure positions. They are very hard to track and it doesn't take much money to take control of those kinds of things. These are unpaid positions. A candidate with a little bit of financial backing, just enough money to get their name out there, can easily take over.

They have said, "well, don't worry, we'll elect the right people." These same entities have spent huge amounts of money to sue the city and huge amounts of money to bring this initiative. They are not going to then turn around and see this new district fall into the hands of liberal, progressive advocates. These are groups and individuals that have fought progressive groups for years. Anybody that thinks they are going to let huge amounts of time and resources and money into this campaign and the lawsuit that preceded it, and then stand down and suddenly become supporters of liberal, left-wing candidates is just kidding himself.

Even if they can't get their candidates elected, what it means is that progressive groups in Portland are going to have to track seven new districts and fight what will likely be a very well financed, corporate-backed campaign in every single one of them, in order to protect our public utilities.

The other thing to realize is that what

See **SALLINGER**, page 9