



'The American public has turned a corner'

Congressman Earl Blumenauer talks about the marijuana revolution, gay rights and, of course, money

BY JAKE THOMAS
STAFF WRITER

Congressman Earl Blumenauer has the veneer of a seasoned Beltway politician, trademark bowtie aside. But to his core, he's a true Portlander. Much has been written about his enthusiasm and support of cycling, mass transit and civic engagement. But on a deeper level, this is the man in Washington fighting for, among other issues, legalized marijuana, gay rights, environmental protections, ending government-sanctioned torture, preventing climate change, closing the prison at Guantanamo Bay, and restoring personal privacy against the government surveillance.

More than four decades ago, Blumenauer was a fresh face in Oregon's Legislature, serving the first of three terms there. He turned to local politics in 1978, serving eight years on the Multnomah County Commission followed by 10 years on the Portland City Council in charge of public works. He jumped into the national scene in 1996 when he was elected to his first of now eight terms in Congress. He currently sits on two of the most influential bodies in Congress: The House Budget and Ways and Means committees.

Earlier this month, the congressman was in Portland to receive the Urban Pioneer award from Portland State University, in recognition for his contributions to the political, social and physical landscape of the Portland region.

While in town, Blumenauer stopped by the Street Roots office. He spoke frankly about the financial trials ahead for the federal government, his campaign for marijuana laws and a little background on the transportation woes Portland is grappling with today.

Street Roots: *There is a theory that everybody's homeless population shows up from somewhere else. They're not ours, get them out of here. What do you think about that?*

Earl Blumenauer: I think that it is a

widespread belief. I think the practical matter is that the homeless population appears to be from somewhere else because it's hard for people to focus on it. It's invisible. They see it, but they don't see who the people are. My sense is that, yes, there are people that are transient people who shift around slightly given the weather or baseball season or whatever.

It is hard for people to understand that these are our vets, that these are our urban Native Americans, that there are kids that are messed up or alienated or abused. I'm not persuaded that this is a huge mobile population. They are less mobile than the general population.

S.R.: *There was that vote the House took pretty recently that basically told the federal government not to interfere with medical marijuana laws.*

E.B.: Actually, there were three votes in the evening of May 28 that had bipartisan majority support to restricting the federal government from interfering with the cultivation of industrial hemp, and one that would withhold funds from the federal government to interfere with medical marijuana laws that states have approved. It's a culmination of what we've seen over the last couple years.

Prior to this the marijuana legislation, efforts had been lead by former representatives Barney Frank (D-Massachusetts) and Ron Paul (R-Texas), both of whom have moved on to other things, but I indicated to Barney several years ago that I would step up and help coordinate a little bit.

The votes last week were the culmination of people starting to realize that the marijuana train has left the station. It's not just the two states that have legalized it for adult use in Colorado and Washington, but it's 22 states and the District of Columbia that have medical marijuana. It's a million people who are authorized to use medical marijuana, as well as the research about the potential impacts it can have and there are

hundreds of perfectly legal businesses involved. They are becoming more aggressive making their case on Capitol Hill, and the American public has turned the corner.

S.R.: *This was really bipartisan. How did the House come together on this, but on so many other issues it struggles?*

E.B.: Street Roots is dedicated to making some significant but incremental steps in helping people get their act together. You are able to combine resources to support the publication, and part of it is self-perpetuating. That's my theory of legislation. Yeah, you can try for grand slam home run, but before you hit a grand slam home run, you have to hit singles and doubles — you have to get someone on base.

Virtually all the legislation we have is bipartisan in nature. The infamous "death panels?" We had 50 bipartisan co-sponsors on that. Marijuana is important on several levels. We have a policy on marijuana that simply makes no sense. Prohibition has failed miserably. Nobody thinks that their eighth-grade daughter has a rougher time getting a joint than a six-pack of beer. Nobody checks your driver's license if you buy a joint. The failure of prohibition is becoming clearer and clearer. We now have public opinion surveys that think it ought to be legal. The disconnect between arresting two-thirds of three-quarters of a million people a year for something 58 percent think should be legal. It's starting to catch up and catch on.

People are starting to put these pieces together, and hemp, ironically, is playing a very important role. Virtually everyone has some hemp product. There is hemp ice cream. Drafts of the Declaration of Independence were written on hemp paper. We had a hemp flag fly over the Capitol last year, and the head of the Drug Enforcement Agency indicated that was the low point of her professional career. [Slaps table.] Where have you been, woman, and what have you been doing if this is the low point of your

career?

We've got 20 states that have either explicitly authorized hemp cultivation or they are taking steps to promote it, Oregon being one of them.

It's fascinating that it's one of those moments in history that's ripe, and Oregon, this year, is poised to be the turning point nationally. We've got these two states, Colorado and Washington, which have done it. Everything's going to be trained on Oregon. People think that if they can beat it in Oregon they can beat it anywhere. If it wouldn't pass in Oregon, where would it pass? If it passes, the wave will crest. We're a cheap state to campaign in, so there will be energy and attention. If it passes here, California is a foregone conclusion, as is Maine.

We've been arguing all along and to reschedule marijuana. It's a Class I Substance, among LSD and heroin, and more dangerous than cocaine and meth.

S.R.: *Meth?*

E.B.: That's according to the schedule. And a class that can have no medicinal qualities, except people have been medicating with marijuana for millennium and millions of people are doing it with a vote of the people.

S.R.: *So what's the next step for all the people behind bars?*

E.B.: Well, there are efforts. The administration is finally moving to deal with the potential of commuting sentences. States are figuring it out. They're filling their prisons. They can't afford it, and it's not working.

We're going through a sea change. We are sending billions to Mexican drug cartels, and it's like Al Capone. Prohibition made Al Capone.

We need better research on marijuana impacts. The DEA, with its restrictive research, will give research grants to people

See **BLUMENAUER**, page 5