

INSURANCE HIKE RALLIES AFSCME

More than 200 cheering city union workers rallied last Wednesday, Sept 15 at city hall calling for city managers to not stick them with rising health insurance costs.

For the last five months, city managers have failed to reach an agreement with the local chapter of the American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME). The union and management are now in mediation, according to an AFSCME flier handed out at the rally.

City workers at the rally chanted, "Where is the money?"; "We want equity!" and "We will win!" Union members waived signs calling for "Jobs with Justice" and "Settle a Fair Contract Now."

At one point, the fire alarm at city hall sounded with a recorded voice ordering a building evacuation. The alarm resulted in city councilors and managers spilling out of a noon meeting into the crowd, telling them that an alarm had sounded and that the building was being evacuated. But the all-clear had just been given by the fire department. The rally continued and councilors went back inside after eight minutes. "Never mind," said Torrey.

"I've never seen a rally like that," said City Manager Dennis Taylor. Taylor declined to provide further details of the labor dispute saying he wanted to discuss the contract at the bargaining table and not through the media.

It's not clear whether rally opponents or supporters pulled the alarm. "We don't know that it was pulled," said a fire department official. He acknowledged the coincidence of the very rare alarm and rarer rally coinciding, but said, "It may have been a malfunction."

The AFSCME flier gives the union's side of the labor dispute with the city. The city has demanded employees start paying 5 percent of the monthly premium for their health insurance, about \$18 to \$55 per month, depending on dependent coverage. The city also wants to cut health benefits 7 percent, resulting in higher out of pocket costs for employees, according to AFSCME.

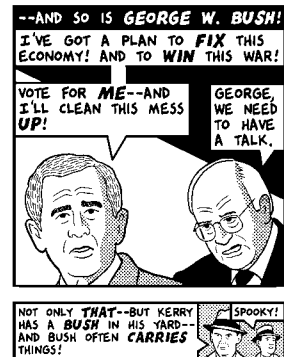
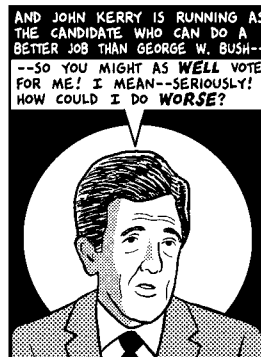
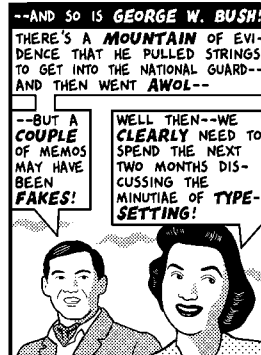
AFSCME says in later years as insurance costs continue to soar 15 to 20 percent a year, the 5 percent will continually increase and benefits will further erode. The union says the city has rejected its offers to cut wages to balance rising health insurance costs. "This battle is not about costs to the city but about the city's philosophy, that we are somehow responsible for the health care industry's excessive profits," the AFSCME flier states. "The city has said that 'employees must feel the pain.'"

But the union complains that city managers aren't feeling the pain. Managers have given themselves a special 2 percent wage increase in the form of a "deferred compensation" package they can use for retirement. "When their PERS retirement was gutted by

THIS MODERN WORLD

by TOM TOMORROW

EERIE PARALLELS



the Legislature, they have a deferred compensation nest egg to fall back on," AFSCME states in the flier.

In contrast, the city refuses to promise to increase wages to make up for cuts in union members' PERS, according to AFSCME. The union says it has given up wage increases in the past in exchange for more retirement benefits.

Other, apparently more minor sticking points include wage increases (the city offers 1.75 percent), holidays and protecting union jobs from being done by non-union and contracted out workers.

At the rally, a tin with a note asked for donations to a strike fund. But the note said an actual strike was still a ways off.

Oddly, the unusual labor friction for the city comes at a time when it is sitting on the biggest cash reserves in its history. City managers say they want to spend \$29 million in internal money they have squirreled away for a huge new police headquarters.

"I think it's fine for the workers to go out there and press their issues," Eugene mayor-elect Kitty Piercy said. Piercy said she understands workers are concerned about opening up a "Pandora's box" if they agree to help pay for rising health care costs.

"It's a very big and difficult challenge," she said. "My hope is that they have a successful bargaining process." — Alan Pittman

UO CONFERENCE FULL

A UO conference on "Making Sustainable Development Work" scheduled for Thursday, Sept. 23, has filled all 130 available seats, according to Shanda LeVan, one of the organizers.

LeVan says the sessions will be taped and edited by Ray Wolf for later broadcast on Community Television.

ROBB HANKINS URGES MORE ARTS DOWNTOWN

Eugene Cultural Services Director Robb Hankins says Eugene has the potential to become the "world's greatest city for the arts and outdoors," and it's not too early to tout ourselves as such.

"When it comes to the outdoors, Eugene is inspiring," Hankins says. "When it comes to the arts and entertainment, Eugene is spectacular."

Hankins, still relatively new to Eugene (he arrived last December), spoke to the City Club of Eugene Sept. 17 and outlined what he would like to see happen to revitalize Eugene, particularly downtown, and build stronger connections between the city and the UO.

"Successful cities do two things consistently," he said. "They define themselves as being great and they make it reality by starting on it today."

Happening people BY PAUL NEEVEI

MADISON MEADOW

Friendly Area Neighborhood residents Lorri Goodman, Craig Haines, Debbie Summers, Noel, Olga Turner, Doug Yook, Susan Jerde, Linda Prier and Lora Byxbe have become even more friendly since last October, when for-sale signs first



appeared on two acres of remnant meadow and orchard south of Madison and 22nd Avenue. "It's our only little wild place," says 12-year resident Prier, a transplant from New York. "I love the trees and flowers, the birds that come. It means a lot to children and older people." An initial meeting of neighbors last fall, on two days notice, attracted 35 people. The nine pictured here now serve as the Board of Directors of Madison Meadow, a new non-profit corporation dedicated to maintaining the land as open space. MM needs to raise \$200,000 by the end of this year to preserve an option to purchase the property. (News flash: An anonymous donor has offered to match all pledges up to a total of \$100,000!) Madison Meadow is planning a silent auction and musical extravaganza for the evening of Saturday, Oct. 2, at Cozmic Pizza in Eugene. For more information online go to madisonmeadow.org

SLANT

• The Eugene Celebration was a gas, as usual, despite the Eugene weather. Who loves Eugene? They showed up in raincoats, umbrellas and grins. The only grimaces were on the mugs of the shivering vendors who took it in their soggy shorts. Our local food and arts and crafts vendors are still around. Give 'em some love. Saturday Market continues rain or shine until Nov. 13, then goes indoors starting Nov. 20 for the Holiday Market.

• Robb Hankins at City Club Sept. 17 tossed out the idea that downtown Eugene would be enhanced and enlivened if all the empty buildings that are for sale were rented out cheap month-to-month to artists of all kinds for studios, galleries, rehearsal space, etc. Excellent idea and we hope downtown property owners get the message. But we are reminded of a related problem with empty downtown buildings: Few are available for long-term leasing since they are for sale. What upper-end restaurant or clothing store is willing to spend \$100,000 for remodeling with

only one-year leases available? We're puzzled by the business strategies of downtown property owners. We recognize that commercial real estate is often valued by a factor of its rental income (no rent might look better on paper than low rent), but vacant buildings keep people away, which in turn lowers property values. Are we looking at empty buildings in Eugene being used as tax write-offs for profits made elsewhere? If so, then parts of downtown Eugene are in effect being held hostage, and our city suffers because of it.

• Peter Chabarek was physically attacked by a Cheney supporter at the Cheney rally in Eugene last week for speaking his mind in protest, but police at the scene did not handcuff and haul off his assailant. Instead Chabarek was tossed out of the rally. We hear Chabarek is choosing to not file charges as a citizen, but why is it up to him? Is assault no longer a crime? Freedom of speech no longer protected?

SLANT includes short opinion pieces, observations and rumor-chasing notes compiled by the EW staff. Heard any good rumors lately? Contact Ted Taylor at 484-0519, editor@eugeneweekly.com