

fearless fighter

A GLIMPSE INTO THE FIRES THAT FUEL BETTY TAYLOR

.....by *sara wachter-boettcher*

One Sunday morning in the early 1930s, Betty Taylor sat in her family's rural Kentucky church, waiting for services to start. Perched in her pew, she watched as a black man entered the room, seated himself amongst the all-white congregation, and took part in the morning's sermon.

As the minister preached, he made no mention of the black man in the congregation's midst — that is, until he was about to leave the pulpit. "In the future, I think our colored friend would be more comfortable with his own kind," Taylor remembers him saying. This was the first time she had tasted injustice, and its bitter flavor stung her 7-year-old mouth.

In the 72 years since that eye-opening day, Taylor has devoted much of her time to fighting injustice — most recently as a Eugene city councilor representing Ward 2, which covers the area south of 29th Avenue between Chambers Street and Spring Boulevard, since 1997. Now in her third consecutive four-year term, which began in January, Taylor recalls the incident at the church as the spark that ignited her passion for politics and her dedication to equality.

When Taylor was a student at Illinois State University, this desire manifested into her work for civil rights and desegregated housing. When she was a young mother, it became a part of her dedication to the women's movement and to equal education. "I was pushing a baby carriage and collecting signatures," she says. "I didn't want to just stay home and stagnate."

While teaching English in Springfield, Ill., Taylor served on the board of the League of Women Voters, campaigned for local mayoral candidates and worked on George McGovern's failed 1972 Democratic bid for the presidency. Taylor, who holds a Ph.D. in English from the University of Oregon, settled into her current south Eugene home in 1983. Busy as she was, she knew she'd get involved here, too. In 1996, when no one to her liking ran for the Ward 2 city councilor position, Taylor, who had retired from teaching, decided to file as a candidate. The south Eugene community responded approvingly, and Taylor's first term began the following January.

Since then, Taylor has run her re-election campaigns on a relative shoestring. In the 2000 election, Mike Sherlock, backed by business and timber interests, outspent Taylor more than two-to-one. In 2004, Maurie Denner, a developer-backed school principal, once again nearly doubled Taylor's expenditures. But despite her opponents' deep pock-

ets, voters opted for Taylor both times. "I think voters respond to honesty and consistency, and a lack of fear," she says.

After more than eight years on the council, Taylor's fearlessness — the gusto with which she fights for justice — has earned her respect from local politicians like Eugene Mayor Kitty Piercy, who calls her "refreshing" and "authentic." Unlike many politicians, Piercy says, Taylor makes her motivations clear to the community.

"She is absolutely real about who she is and what she stands for," Piercy says. "She is not one to change her mind or to move toward a middle ground, but I never see her intentionally try to hurt anyone in a way that disregards their humanity. I must say I like that about her."

But Taylor's stances have also earned her some critics, including her former opponent Denner. He and Taylor disagree on what he calls "managed growth" — bringing businesses to Eugene and creating jobs, a strategy he supports. In contrast, he says, Taylor's politics often put too much emphasis on the environment. Denner supports the proposed West Eugene Parkway; Taylor does not. Denner pushes for increased public safety funding and a new police building; Taylor would rather see city money funneled toward parks and quality-of-life programs. "She has a lot of respect and love for the city, and I do too," Denner says. "We just see the solutions as being different."

For Taylor, this love for the city means putting in 20 or 30 hours per week (and sometimes much more) working on council activities and serving on various committees. In fact, she spends so little time at home that she was reluctant to get a dog until a couple of years ago, when a neighbor offered to come over each afternoon to feed and play with it. Now she makes time to spend with her golden retriever, Toby, wandering the paths at Mt. Pisgah and working in her yard.

But there's more on Taylor's plate than attending city council meetings and walking with Toby. She also serves on the city's Budget Committee, the Intergovernmental Relations Committee, the No Child Left Behind Task Force, the Public Safety Coordinating Council and the Lane Regional Air Pollution Authority (LRAPA) board of directors.

Outside of the city council, the LRAPA board is perhaps the best known of Taylor's assignments — and, recently, the most politically tense. Responsible for maintaining the county's compliance with state and federal air quality regulations, the organization has

spent the past six months dealing with infighting, budget problems and a string of dismissals. Between November 2004 and January 2005, five of 19 staff members were laid off or fired, including former LRAPA director Brian Jennison.

At the same time, the agency's board membership shifted. In past years, County Commissioner Pete Sorenson and other pro-environment officials on the board often supported Taylor's public health-minded stance. This is no longer the case. Since the start of 2005, she's been on the losing end of more than a couple 6-1 votes.

"LRAPA is a mess just now," she says. "Since the board membership changed dramatically, I am frequently in the minority. I protested the firing of the previous director. I think it was unfair treatment, and I strongly objected to the board's participation in laying off three people with a few hours' notice."

Once again, Taylor's goals for the crumbling agency — public health protection, environmental conservation and fair employment — harken back to her original motivation: justice. In her thinking, justice isn't just about creating equality here and now; it's also about nurturing healthy communities for future generations.

Taylor brings that tenacity to the city council. On April 20, she cast the lone opposing vote in a 7-1 decision that the city apply for a state enterprise zone designation in west Eugene. The limited zone provides up to 100-percent tax breaks for manufacturing companies meeting job creation and investment standards in a designated area. But Taylor says that the enterprise zone would create incentives for businesses with-

out giving the city adequate control over workers' living wages or sustainable practices. "If it's ever worth giving a tax break, we should have control over what they're doing to our environment," she says. Without this guarantee, she felt the proposition was too risky to take. And although she stood alone in her dissent, Taylor felt compelled to voice her opinion. "I think it's important to say it for the people who can't say it in public," she says.

Coupled with Taylor's work toward sustainability is her dedication to preserving Eugene's high standard of living through low-cost arts and recreation programs, such as the recently renovated Amazon Pool and Eugene's former adult recreation program, which was slashed back in the budget cuts of the mid-1990s. "It contributed to a feeling of community," she says of the lost recreation program. "Those things eventually contribute more to safety than police."

But when budgets are cut, these programs are often the first to go — or, in the case of Amazon Pool, where a summer family membership now costs nearly \$200, fees are raised so high that many families can no longer afford to participate. And when working families are priced out of community services, when all members of the community can't access or benefit from services, Taylor once again feels the sting of injustice.

Although the issues have changed since her Kentucky youth, Taylor's first priority — the glue that binds her political views together — hasn't changed a bit. "Even though it's a small thing, it's important to people's lives," she says. "I care about justice for everyone."

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