



The Oregonian

PDC looks beyond abortion, OKs clinic

Planned Parenthood - MLK neighbors want the jobs, the high-end building and the other 95 percent of the nonprofit's services

Thursday, April 12, 2007

RYAN FRANK
The Oregonian

In a controversial vote before a standing-room crowd, the city of Portland gave its OK on Wednesday for Planned Parenthood to relocate its regional headquarters to a city-owned lot along Northeast Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard.

The Portland Development Commission, the city's urban renewal agency, voted 4-1 to bring the clinic's sex education, pregnancy prevention and abortion services to a stretch of MLK still scarred by 1960s race riots and decades of neglect. The commission sided with supporters who say the neighborhood needs Planned Parenthood's health services, 140 jobs, retail shops and high-end building design on a boulevard that's still lined with empty buildings and chain-link fences.

But the commission overruled emotional opponents -- from nearby African American pastors to white suburbanites -- who had moral and religious objections to Planned Parenthood's plan to provide abortions. The clinic would be in Portland's historically African American neighborhood, along MLK Boulevard and within walking distance of several churches.

"They are rich white people who say that they love the blacks, who give them the name of a street and then kill their children," Carolyn Wendell from Voice of Catholics Advocating Life said of Planned Parenthood. "I don't think that's appropriate."

But Commissioner Charles Wilhoite saw it another way.

"As an African American sitting on this commission, I feel I'm in a unique position to say Planned Parenthood hasn't been the demise of the African American community, and it won't be. Years of discrimination have put the African American community behind other communities.

"The best thing to combat discrimination is education -- all types of education. And I think Planned Parenthood . . . 95 percent of their services are in the area of education."

Planned Parenthood's deal came about because the group was looking for a place to consolidate its headquarters with its Northeast clinic, and the city was looking to redevelop a grassy lot at Beech Street.

The debate that followed covered race, class, religion and the legacy of the slain civil rights leader for whom the street is named.

"It's as divided as gentrification," said Wilbert Hardy, senior pastor at Highland Christian Center in Northeast Portland.

More than 100 people turned out Wednesday to share their opinions and hear the PDC vote.

Bill Diss, a Benson High teacher and Beaverton resident who opposes the deal, turned in what he said were more than 1,000 signatures he collected by walking the neighborhood and visiting churches. Many signatures came from Portlanders, including a list of people from the Immaculate Heart Catholic Church on North Williams Avenue, a few blocks from the proposed clinic. A number of other people from Beaverton, Tigard and Oregon City also signed the petition.

Even opponents support the clinic's sex-education and disease-prevention work. But opposition to abortion has forged unusual alliances and divisions. It has split the African American Alliance, a group of civic leaders that's meant to bring them together. A Muslim community center next door opposes it. A white United Church of Christ minister from outer Northeast Portland supports it.

Three City Council members -- Sam Adams, Dan Saltzman and Erik Sten -- endorsed it. But Mayor Tom Potter, who has made MLK's redevelopment his top priority for urban renewal, didn't take a position.

"A moral judgment"

In addition to those who signed the petition or turned out Wednesday, many people wrote letters to the city.

"I think the higher moral ground is to let children see life," Mark Milroy wrote.

"Whether you agree or not, your decision regarding the Planned Parenthood . . . will make a moral judgment. There is no morally neutral choice. Examine your conscience and good luck on your decision."

J. Salma Ahmad, president of the Islamic Society of Greater Portland, told the PDC board that as a nursing student she witnessed an abortion done to save the mother. "Now," she said, "it's still a nightmare for me." Ahmad said the Muslim center next door to the clinic's proposed site is a place to pray for life. "And next door, they are probably taking life," she said.

Hardy of the Albina Ministerial Alliance and Joyce Harris of the African American Alliance joined Diss and others in objecting. Some pastors have spoken out against abortions, and Hardy and Harris asked the PDC to delay its vote to give more time for a public debate. Hardy said "a good portion of the community does not want it on MLK. . . . Why didn't they put it in Beaverton on Hall Boulevard or Canyon Road? Why not the Pearl District?"

In casting their votes, PDC commissioners said they tried to separate their moral opinions from the economic realities of urban renewal on MLK. Wilhoite said a delay wouldn't ensure another similar project that could hit so many economic development goals without a taxpayer subsidy.

But Commissioner Bertha Ferran, who favors abortion rights and sits on the Catholic Charities board of directors, said she opposed the deal because she wanted a compromise between the clinic and opponents. She hoped Planned Parenthood could move to MLK and keep its abortions at its existing Southeast office.

"If they could not compromise, I didn't see how I could support it," she said.

All service in one place

David Greenberg, president of the local Planned Parenthood chapter, said he considered building the offices without adding abortion services. But Greenberg said he wants to keep the services in Northeast Portland, and the cost to relocate the abortion services would run an extra \$1 million.

Abortions make up about 5 percent of the nonprofit's overall services. At its existing Northeast clinic, Planned Parenthood offers the RU 486 pill, which aborts early pregnancies, to about 17 people a month. About 5 percent of the patients at the Northeast clinic are African American. The MLK site would provide the pill and surgical abortions, but Greenberg said he doesn't know how many.

While some black civic and church leaders opposed the abortions, others supported the clinic.

Paul Knauls Sr., owner of Geneva's Shear Perfection on MLK and an African American Alliance member, wants to see the redevelopment. The Rev. Chuck Currie from Parkrose Community United Church of Christ

in outer Northeast Portland backed the abortion services. Currie said his predecessor served on Planned Parenthood's board.

"We should reject any attempts by those who would insist that their religious views on abortion should supersede the religious freedom of others who come to a different conclusion," Currie wrote.

Jane Maynard told the PDC that she appreciated Planned Parenthood's education for young people. "That's how we arm our children to be successful. I'm 100 percent behind this project.

"Oh, did I mention my husband's a minister?"

Ryan Frank: 503-221-8564; ryanfrank@news.oregonian.com

©2007 The Oregonian