

WH Hears Testimony on Domestic Partnership

City Hopes to Expand Ordinance

By TIMOTHY STIRTON

The City of West Hollywood held a public forum on its domestic partnership ordinance on April 24 in hopes of finding ways to strengthen the ordinance and make more people aware of its existence.

The meeting, chaired by West Hollywood Mayor Abbe Land and City Councilmember Steve Schulte, included testimony by experts in the field of domestic partnership. Speakers included Dr. Betty Berzon, author of *Permanent Partners*; Roberta Achtenberg, executive director of the National Center for Lesbian Rights; Thomas F. Coleman, chairman of the Los Angeles Family Diversity Task Force; and Jean Conger, former co-chair of the West Hollywood Gay and Lesbian Task Force.

During the two hours of testimony, those gathered heard praise lavished on the West Hollywood ordinance.

"Comparing your ordinance to what everyone else has leads me to congratulate you," said Achtenberg. "Your legislation is still state-of-the-art."

Despite the praise, Achtenberg and others noted that there was room for improvement.

One area frequently cited is the \$20,000 cap on medical costs for domestic partners of West Hollywood employees. Conger praised the council for adopting the Task Force's recommendation on extending health care benefits to domestic partners, but called the \$20,000 limit, "woefully inadequate," suggesting that the council explore ways to raise the limit.

Conger also proposed that the city include domestic partnership as a category on employment applications, and that the city should encourage private businesses with city contracts to recognize domestic partnerships as well.

Berzon talked about some of the symbolic benefits of the domestic partnership ordinance, particularly for gays and lesbians couples who can't legally marry.

"The age of the couple" has arrived in the gay and lesbian community, she said, and "official silence about gay and lesbian relationships is no longer acceptable. . . . It reenforces the myth that gay relationships don't count, don't work and don't last."

Domestic partnership, she suggested, is a way to publicly acknowledge and validate same-sex relationships, and extend some rights to domestic partners. Quoting former California Chief Justice Rose Bird, she said, "An opposite sex couple that have been married one hour, have more rights than a same-sex couple that have been together 25 years."

Aside from medical benefits, domestic partners in West Hollywood are granted hospital and jail visitation rights, and some benefits are allowed under the city's rent stabilization ordinance.

All the speakers agreed, however, that more needed to be done to clarify rights that domestic partners don't have and misconceptions that may exist in the community.

"There needs to be something that explains in lay terms what the domestic partnership ordinance does and doesn't do," said Achtenberg. "People think domestic partnership has some universal meaning and that's wrong. It's different from West Hollywood to Berkeley to Santa Cruz. Signing up as a domestic partner cannot, for instance, replace a written will, but some [people] may have that misconception."

cities nationwide with a domestic partnership ordinance. Since being passed in 1985, 219 domestic partnerships have been filed with the city: 137 to gay male couples, 31 to lesbian couples, and 50 to heterosexual couples.

The Athletic Club, the first business in West Hollywood to extend benefits to domestic partners, announced it will offer membership at a "two-for-one" price to domestic partners who present their official City of West Hollywood certificate to the club during the month of June. For information, call 213/659-6630.

Domestic Partnership Hearing Set April 24

The city of West Hollywood will sponsor a public hearing on its Domestic Partnership Ordinance on Monday, April 24 at 7 pm in the City Hall Council Chambers, 8615 Santa Monica Boulevard. The hearing is designed to be a "report card" on the landmark legislation.

Guests scheduled to participate in the public hearing include attorney Thomas Coleman, an authority on domestic partnership law; Dr. Betty Berzon, author of *Permanent Partners*; Roberta Achtenberg, an associate with the Lesbian Rights Project in San Francisco; a representative from Kaiser Permanente Hospital; and Jeff Miles, the city's insurance broker.

Residents who have comments or concerns about the city's domestic partnership ordinance are invited to attend and testify.

For more information about the hearing, call the City Clerk's office at (213) 854-7408.