

Statewide NAACP Lobby Day

Oregon chapter presidents call for passage of environmental and criminal justice reform bills

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Oregon's four NAACP branch presidents were in Salem Monday, June 12, to announce the release of the organization's "Oregon Environmental Justice" report and to support several bills before the end of the state's 2017 regular legislative session.

Eugene/Springfield NAACP President Eric Richardson says, "We are concerned and here to make sure that the voices of communities of color and the poor are heard going forward with the clean energy economy and all the benefits that we see."

At a press conference, the presidents of the African-American civil rights organization were asking legislators to

pass bills pertaining to clean energy jobs, grand jury recordation and law enforcement data-collection for tracking racial profiling.

Portland chapter president Jo Ann Hardesty says the report summarizes opportunities to earn green energy credits and clean energy improvements.

"But what we want to know is especially what communities are benefiting, because the data that Oregon currently collects does not show whether or not low-income communities are enjoying the same benefits as upper-middle class communities."

Benny Williams, the Salem chapter president, says, "We're here today, not only talking about the environmental impact that needs to take place — we've got a president who is working toward reversing the last 15 years of efforts improving our environment, water and air."

The environmental justice report published national findings that show the rates at which communities of color suffer disproportionately from health issues caused by living in close proximity to nuclear, coal and biomass power plants.

These communities are also more likely to be hit first by major disasters, and low-income households spend three times more on electricity than all other income levels. "Low and moderate income families make up 40 percent of the U.S. populations, but only 5 percent of rooftop solar owners (the most common form of distributed energy generation)," according to the report.

The report also evaluates Oregon state policies and makes recommendations to strengthen policies and to expand "participation and success of minority owned businesses in Oregon's economy."

The various NAACP branches then met to discuss lobbying efforts regarding a senate bill that would require Oregon grand jury proceedings to be recorded. Currently, SB 496 is in the Ways and Means committee. Oregon operates on an 1863 law that relies on handwritten notes that are kept in a file after a witness is called to testify. Defense attorneys are not permitted to see the notes and a judge is not present during the hearing.

The American Civil Liberties Union supports the bill, according to its website, and states that the recording of grand juries ensures their process is transparent and constitutional.

Oregon's NAACP branches also support House Bill 2355, which would require the Oregon Criminal Justice Commission, including all statewide law enforcement officers, to track data of all traffic and pedestrian stops. The data would be used to develop a system

to track racial profiling. Eugene, Lane County and Springfield police currently don't track and provide that information, though Eugene police have started testing software to track the data.

Sen. Lew Frederick of Portland spoke to NAACP members and advocates, and says there is a need for better training of current and potential police officers.

The branch presidents then met with Gov. Kate Brown for a brief closed-door meeting to discuss the bills. Richardson says the governor "is confident that the ending profiling bill will pass as well as the grand jury bill."

The day was about bringing the state branches of the NAACP together and collective action in lobbying and releasing the report, which shows the "NAACP is moving in a new, more progressive direction around environmental justice," Richardson says.

Members of Eugene organizations Beyond Toxics, 350 Eugene and Community Alliance of Lane County also attended the lobby day event. CALC President Michael Carrigan says the organization came "to support the NAACP work demanding that green economy needs to be used as a vehicle to correct the many wrongs afflicted in communities of color and poor communities."

Oregon's regular legislative session will wrap up by July 10.

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