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**Builders construct tenacious lobby**

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**By BILL VIRGIN**

SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER COLUMNIST

By the time the state gets around to counting the votes from today's elections, we may have a winner to declare in a race not on the ballot: most effective lobbying group in Washington.

Boeing? The airplane maker has proven it still possesses the ability to make the Legislature ask "how high" when it says jump. But the new contender for the crown has already demonstrated that what Boeing has won, it can take away.

Labor? The labor community may hold some sway over the governor or regulatory and rulemaking agencies. But the leading candidate for designation as the most effective lobbying group may prove, depending on the election's outcome, that it can take away a favored issue from labor just as it did to Boeing. Even if it loses on this issue, just getting it on the ballot and getting so much endorsement weight behind it is a measure of substantial clout.

Not the Association of Washington Business, not the Washington Education Association, not the farmers, small business or retailing groups, not even the Tim Eyman cadre of anti-tax activists has in recent years demonstrated such influence on the state political scene.

The likely winner of that title: The Building Industry Association of Washington.

Consider the track record. When Boeing talked the Legislature into rewriting the rules on unemployment compensation fund assessments, a change the building association's members saw as disadvantageous to them, they went out and got a referendum on the ballot to let voters decide, got the changes revoked, and had a major voice when the rules were rewritten again, this time more to the group's liking.

And now comes the ergonomics rule, proposed by Gov. Gary Locke and the Department of Labor & Industries and adopted in 2000 (with a phase-in period). After failing to get a change in those rules by way of the Legislature, BIAW went out and got an initiative on the ballot that would not just repeal the existing rule but prevent L&I from adopting new ergonomics rules on its own.

That's an impressive track record over two years. So how does a trade association of home builders -- at first blush, hardly a sizable component of the electorate -- command such influence?

For starters, it's not just a group of home builders. BIAW claims not just builders but all the subcontractors that are part of home building -- plumbers and electricians and drywallers and the like. BIAW counts 10,000 members; the Association of Washington Business counts 3,700.

But of course there are plenty of groups with lots of members and no clout. What differentiates BIAW? Money certainly helps -- BIAW, according to the Public Disclosure Commission, has contributed more than \$800,000 in cash and in-kind contributions to the I-841 campaign.

But it's even more than that. "We stand for something," says Executive Vice President Tom McCabe.

BIAW is a group with definite opinions and little reluctance to voice them, and it does so because its members want it to, McCabe says. Those members have become particularly disenchanted with state government in recent years. Says McCabe, "They'd argue that state government is corrupt."

That's not an attitude designed to win friends in Olympia, which McCabe says is the point. "Other business groups get enmeshed in the world of Olympia; they want people to like them," he says. That means preserving personal relationships, sometimes at the expense of pushing a group's position.

If there's one group that McCabe models his approach after, it's the group that is most likely to be on the opposite side of virtually every issue. "One thing I always respected about the labor unions -- they don't care about their personal relationships," McCabe says. "They're willing to fight for their members."

BIAW's bulldog approach to issues and its members' activism provides a point for other business groups to coalesce around -- or perhaps hide behind. "I wish more would join us" in voicing specific displeasure about the way the state treats business, McCabe says. "I can't imagine other groups aren't hearing the same things we do."

So after ergonomics, what's next? Two years of increases in worker's compensation premiums have businesses royally irked. Tort reform and the difficulty of getting liability insurance is another issue likely to get attention, McCabe says.

But if Initiative 841 passes, a big issue will be how groups of all sizes and persuasions attempt to get their messages across and issues promoted in this state.

BIAW is proving that if you work an issue hard (money and activism), display some political savvy in presenting it to the public (the ergonomics rule campaign has become at least as much a jobs issue as a workplace health and safety issue) and have the handy mechanism of the referendum/initiative process, whether legislators or administrators in Olympia like you pales in importance.

A BIAW win is going to prompt those groups to rethink their approach, starting with this lesson: If you can't articulate clearly and forcefully what you're for or against, even at the risk of making someone mad at you, you can hardly expect the public to pay much attention to you, much less rally to your cause.

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