

2/6/93

Fair housing for gays?

PLEASE READ!

By Valerie Richardson
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

SAN FRANCISCO — Roberta Achtenberg, President Clinton's nominee as the nation's top fair-housing enforcer, says she favors adding homosexuals as a protected class under the federal Fair Housing Act.

As assistant secretary for fair housing and equal opportunity, Miss Achtenberg would be in a unique position to lobby for an expansion of the law, which prohibits housing discrimination based on race, national-ity and religious affiliation.

"Obviously I believe there is housing discrimination directed at gays and lesbians," said Miss Achtenberg,

HUD nominee supports protection of homosexuals

the first open homosexual nominated for high federal office, in a telephone interview Thursday. "If Congress decides to consider it, obviously I would support it."

She said that issue would not be "my first order of business." If confirmed for the Department of Housing and Urban Development post, she said her top priority would be to revitalize the fair-housing office's method of handling discrimination complaints. She said the office has

not incorporated a 1989 law giving it greater authority to resolve housing abuses.

Her nomination Tuesday shocked some of those familiar with her limited record on housing and her activism for homosexual rights.

Elected to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors in 1990, the 42-year-old lawyer is known primarily for her advocacy of "alternative families," especially lesbian parenthood, her concern for women's

rights and her opposition to the Boy Scouts of America.

The criticism comes from both ends of the political spectrum. While conservatives are focusing on her liberal social agenda, her lack of housing experience has led some civil rights activists to consider opposing her nomination.

In a letter last month to HUD Secretary Henry Cisneros, about 40 civil rights groups urged him to appoint someone with an extensive background in fair-housing litigation, experience she admittedly lacks.

"I'm not a fair-housing expert by a long shot," said Miss Achtenberg,

see HUD, page A10

PRESIDENT CLINTON'S NOMINATION OF ROBERTA ACHTENBERG, A LESBIAN, TO THE DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT, IS A THREAT TO THE AMERICAN FAMILY. SHE IS A FOUNDER OF THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR LESBIAN RIGHTS AND HAS DEDICATED HER LIFE TO WINNING THE "RIGHTS" OF LESBIANS TO ADOPT LITTLE BABIES. PLEASE HELP ME STOP HER NOMINATION BY SIGNING THE ENCLOSED MESSAGES TO YOUR SENATORS AND RETURNING THEM TO ME TODAY!

97

HUD

From page A1

a founder of the National Center for Lesbian Rights. "I've done public-interest law, and in my capacity as a county supervisor I've dealt with [housing issues], ... but I'm not a fair-housing lawyer."

She has won the endorsement of some initially skeptical groups. The National Fair Housing Alliance and the Washington Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights decided to back her after their directors met with her last week.

"She doesn't have a lot of substantive background in fair housing, but her instincts are good," said John P. Relman, director of the WLCCR's fair-housing project. "She's smart and attentive, and she made it clear her goals were to correct a lot of the problems at HUD."

Her critics say her appointment was a "political payoff," in the words of Lou Sheldon, chairman of the Traditional Values Coalition in Anaheim, Calif., for helping deliver California's homosexual vote to Mr. Clinton. As a national co-chairman of the Clinton campaign, Miss Achtenberg was among the first top homosexual leaders to endorse him.

She freely admits she lobbied Mr. Clinton for the post. "I told him of my interest in working for HUD because of my experience in working as a civil rights lawyer. I have to say I'm thrilled and delighted. It's perfectly consistent with my interests as a legislator and as a civil rights lawyer."

She has experience where housing policy and the interests of homosexuals meet. Documents on file with the San Francisco Board of Supervisors show that in December

1991 she voted to require homosexual support groups at two homeless hotels funded by federal and city housing money.

In September 1991, she sponsored a resolution denouncing the Traditional Values Coalition for promoting a ballot initiative to repeal laws banning discrimination, including housing bias, against homosexuals. The ballot measure failed.

Her HUD post would enable her to play a critical role in short-circuiting attempts to repeal gay-rights laws. Now sweeping through many Western states, the movement gained its first major victory in November with the passage of Colorado's Amendment 2, which eliminated homosexuals as a protected class in housing, jobs and other areas.

Efforts are under way in 12 other states to place similar initiatives on 1994 ballots. Advocates on both sides of the issue say Miss Achtenberg could be instrumental in pushing through a federal ban on discrimination based on sexual orientation. Such a ban would override local laws and stifle future referendums.

"This puts on notice to many communities that they're going to have to deal with the Clinton administration and Roberta, who are concerned with discrimination issues," said J Craig Fong, director of the Western office of the Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund. "It will deter many communities that want to do this because HUD and Roberta are going to be there."

That comes as bleak news to groups such as the Oregon Citizens Alliance, which led an unsuccessful effort to ban statewide homosexual-rights laws last year.

"I'm sure since she's a homosexual activist she's going to push her

agenda into that realm," OCA political director Phillip Ramsdell said. "People who rent out homes are probably going to be forced to rent out to homosexuals."

With such a limited record on housing, conservative organizations preparing to fight her nomination are focusing instead on her homosexual activism. In the past year, her name has been linked most closely with San Francisco efforts to ban or defund the Boy Scouts for refusing to admit open homosexuals.

Bob Knight, director of cultural studies for the Family Research Council, called her "the nation's No. 1 Boy Scout basher." He said her opposition to the Boy Scouts stems not just from its exclusion of homosexuals but also from its refusal to admit girls and its use of the word "God" in reciting the Pledge of Allegiance.

"She's done everything in her power to evict the Boy Scouts," Mr. Knight said. "I imagine she'll be no less radical at HUD in using her post to launch front-end attacks on people with traditional values."

In 1989, Miss Achtenberg headed the Mayor's Task Force on Family Policy, which recommended giving medical insurance and other benefits to the unmarried "domestic partners" of city workers. A leader in the push for giving legal status to domestic partners, she said, "Our city [should be] a model for the new family."

Mr. Knight referred to the task force's report as "an attempt to delegitimize the mom-and-dad-type family."

"Achtenberg makes Donna Shalala look like a moderate," he said. "This should be an easy one for the Republicans. If they can't do something with her, they might as well go home."