

# Face to Face with Brent Barton

BY TOBY BERRY

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Who is Brent Barton and why should locals care? In a nutshell, he is the youngest member of the Oregon House of Representatives, currently representing Estacada, Damascus, Clackamas, and parts of Oregon City, Happy Valley, Lents, and Boring—House District 51. Barton is an Oregon native, now running for State Senate District 26, the position that Senator Rick Metzger will vacate in 2010, which also represents our area.

A twenty-nine-year-old Harvard Law School graduate and Stanford alumnus, he is unarguably intelligent and well educated. Barton practices law with Perkins Coie, LLP, in Portland when the Oregon House of Representatives is not in session. He also does pro-bono legal work and is involved in youth mentoring programs. How does he do all of that? He says he doesn't sleep much.

Barton announced his candidacy for the State Senate in September, so it is old news. But, the majority of his constituents don't know him personally, so the Observer takes you up close and personal with your democratic candidate for the State Senate.

Barton is a self-professed optimist. He says that despite many voters' cynical ideas about politicians, he believes that the politicians that he works with are in it for the right reasons. Because they are all there to do what they think is right for our state, he says, "I'd like to think that we make more steps forward than backwards."

Are you wondering why a freshman in the House of Representatives would want to start all over again with campaigning and making friends and associations in a new chamber? Barton says, "Being one of thirty instead of one of sixty members, I think that the senate is a slightly better perch to affect policy change." He says that even though many constituents assume that since he is running for state senate, he is politically upwardly mobile. This isn't the case. He emphatically states that he loves practicing law and has no interest in being a career politician. He says that being in the Oregon Congress is a means toward a policy end. He explains that although they are currently making incremental changes and laws for the good in state congress, he thinks we're

heading in the wrong direction overall. He wants to be a state senator to help our state move in the right direction. What wrong direction is he referring to? Barton states, "I believe that government should be on the side of the people who work hard and play by the rules. It isn't now."

Not only is Barton an optimist, he is a fighter, and has strong beliefs about what policies need to be instituted in Oregon. He thinks that we need a strong rainy day fund, and that we need fewer tax breaks for corporations. He believes in increased transparency and oversight in our government in general, but especially in the administration of programs that give out tax breaks, more specifically. He cites the recent article in the Oregonian about the business energy tax credit as an example of a good plan gone bad that desperately needs more oversight.

Barton is referring to the Oregonian's October 31st article by Harry Esteve, reporting that the Business Energy Tax Credit (BETC) costs were purposefully underestimated before being voted into law, and that BETC has since awarded millions of dollars to failed companies. For example, a Clatskanie ethanol plant got \$12 million in tax subsidies plus a \$20 million state energy loan, then promptly went bankrupt and stopped operating. The plant, Cascade Grains, claims it's still owed \$10 million in tax credits and it may sue to try to get them. Meanwhile voters are being asked to raise income taxes because the state budget doesn't have enough to pay for schools and other programs.

Briefly stated, Barton believes that the biggest issue facing Oregon is economic development. The key to economic development is education, and one of the key issues in helping the education system (and thus economic development) is healthcare reform.

He clearly sees the connection between all of these issues and says that he realized this when he was having a conversation with friend and colleague, Chris Garrett, from Lake Oswego about healthcare and education.

He sees the connection thusly: For companies to stay in Oregon, they need an educated workforce. They also need a high quality vocationally-trained workforce. Therefore we must

invest in education. We need a world-class system, which obviously costs money. The schools and other businesses are being drained, in part by the constantly rising cost of healthcare benefits to their employees. Healthcare costs must come under control in order for school funding to improve and the business climate, in general, to improve.

So, how does he propose to bring down healthcare costs, thus improving the education system and finally trickling up to an improved economic climate?

Barton has two words for that—preventive care. He explains that fifteen percent of the population accounts for seventy percent of the healthcare dollars spent in this country. The highest expenditure is related to diabetes. The road to Type II diabetes is a predictable one, and there are many stops along the way that could help avoid the disease. Focusing on kids' wellness is so much cheaper than treatment later on.

"We need healthcare reform. I am not talking about the national debate about who gets healthcare and how we pay for it. I am talking about shifting monetary spending on healthcare in Oregon to preventive care [so that overall costs of care, and thus health insurance costs, decrease]." He also believes that healthcare is not just an economic, but a moral issue, too.

And, Barton has every right to talk morality. He has a strong sense of morality himself. Though he can't hand out preventive care because he isn't a physician, he gives in areas where he does have direct expertise. He gives an enormous amount of his time to helping less fortunate people, working on pro bono legal cases. He is also active in mentoring programs for youth interested in the legal profession. He gives of his time, when most of us in his shoes would rightly claim to be too busy to do so.

There is more going on in the Oregon Congress than things directly affecting healthcare and education, however, and Barton has worked on other issues that he believes in as well. Investing in roads and bridges is of great importance to him, and he's brought millions of tax dollars into that arena during his first stint in the house. Taxation helps the overall business climate, he

thinks, and so Barton works to reduce tax breaks that he sees as the state giving away way too much money. But the issue of economic development through improvement of our education system is his highest priority, and he constantly comes back to that basic premise.

It is easy for some politicians to spend days in Salem or with their own life's work, losing sight of the issues directly affecting their constituents. Not Barton. Barton volunteered to be "Principal for a Day" at Damascus Middle School last month, participating in the Principal for a Day program in the Gresham Barlow School District. When asked to describe that event, Barton's face lit up: "That was one of the most fun days I've had in a long time," he said with a huge grin on his face.

He said that the biggest and most uplifting surprises to him about that day were the level of parental engagement he witnessed, and how good those kids were. He was pleased to see that they still have quality art, PE, and music classes at school, too. And finally, he was impressed by the classes and teachers. "The teachers were so good," he said. The remedial math class for 8th graders made a particular impression because there were two teachers working with only about fifteen kids, and Barton realized how atypical this is in the school system overall these days.

After being in school for a day, perhaps Barton was energized to write new laws to help emulate the things he was impressed with at DMS. Not so, according to Barton. "I don't think we should mandate certain changes because every district faces different challenges. I am not an educator and I don't pretend to know what each school district needs. I believe that we need to be giving school districts flexibility to be able to innovate." And that is where that rainy day fund comes in. "They need sta-



ble money, not just more money," says Barton. "They can't bring on new programs when they don't know if the money will be there next year to keep these programs going. The best way to stabilize school funding is to have a solid rainy day fund, so that school funding doesn't ebb when the economy slows."

One of Barton's biggest assets is his desire to listen to his constituents, Republican or Democrat. During his first term as representative in the Oregon House, he posted a survey online that constituents could fill out, helping to see what their spending priorities were. Barton said, "It was more helpful than you'd think." He learned that almost everyone wants improved education, but was surprised to find how much the survey participants appreciated early childhood programs. Head Start, for example, was a big priority winner in the survey. He says he'll continue to post surveys, but that there are various other ways to let your opinions be known to him.

Barton requests that people e-mail him. "We read every e-mail. If they take the time to send an e-mail, it means something to me," he says with great sincerity. "It has changed my mind on a couple of issues," he claims.

Barton also conducts regular Coffee and Conversation gatherings in Damascus, Clackamas, and Estacada. Everyone in the area is invited to attend.

When asked what he most wants people to know about him, Barton quickly replied, "I pride myself on my work ethic. I want people to know how hard I work. I don't know if people can tell."

