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## EXCLUSIVE: A Big Compromise on Gay Marriage?

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As the [gay marriage](#) debate heats up at the Statehouse, one state rep is weighing a compromise measure that she says just might bring both sides together.

Opponents are crying foul over what they see as an attempt to redefine [marriage](#) while supporters say earning the right to call their relationships "marriages" is the only way to ensure that [gay](#) and straight couples are on equal footing.

"There seems to be an issue with a word and I want to make sure there is equality," said state Rep. Karen MacBeth, a self-described conservative Democrat from Cumberland. "If we're hung up on a word, let's use a different word."

If the current bill to legalize gay marriage successfully makes it to the House floor, MacBeth is considering offering an amendment that would substitute the phrase "civil unions" for "marriage." As a result, the state would stop offering marriage licenses and instead offer civil

unions to both straight and [gay couples](#).

One veteran state rep whom she declined to name has told MacBeth that it would be too much of an undertaking to strip the word "marriage" from all state laws. MacBeth, however, points to the recent debate over taking out the phrase "Providence Plantations" from the state name. "If we can take a vote on changing the name of the state, we can certainly vote on changing the word 'marriage,'" she said.

### 'The word marriage is a lightning rod'

Several other state reps interviewed by GoLocalProv yesterday said they thought a civil unions bill had a much better chance of passing the House than gay marriage. "I think where the word 'marriage' is a lightning rod ... civil unions probably would have an easier time," said Rep. Joy Hearn, D-Barrington. "I think people would be willing to vote for something excluding the word 'marriage,'" agreed Rep. Lisa Baldelli-Hunt, D-Woonsocket.



MacBeth says she thinks conservative Democrats would rally around a civil unions proposal. But Baldelli-Hunt, for one, said she wouldn't have a position on it until she read the text of the civil unions amendment. She said she would prefer to put the issue on the ballot. "I still feel as though we're delving into the consciences of constituents and we have no position meddling there," she said.

Hearn, a socially liberal Democrat, said civil unions are the ideal to her. "In a perfect world, I would have the word 'marriage' stripped out of all legal documents and it would be civil unions," Hearn said. For now, she says she's backing the gay marriage bill, but says she could see civil unions as a viable compromise if supporters of gay marriage are OK with it.

Several Republicans told GoLocalProv they could get behind a civil unions measure too. "I'd support anything but gay marriage," said Rep. Joe Trillo, R-Warwick. "I have a problem giving same-sex couples the word 'marriage.'" Rep. Brian Newberry, R-North Smithfield, also said he supports civil unions.

Another potential advantage: While House Speaker Gordon Fox supports gay marriage, Senate President Teresa Paiva Weed does not. But she does support civil unions. (A spokesman for Fox last night said the Speaker does not oppose civil unions but is focused for now on getting gay marriage passed.)



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The civil unions compromise would have major hurdles to

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