



Politics

[Comments](#) | Recommended 

R.I. House speaker says it's too soon for vote on same-sex marriage

01:00 AM EST on Friday, February 11, 2011

By Katherine Gregg

Journal State House Bureau

PROVIDENCE — After chairing an 8 ½-hour hearing the night before on a proposal to legalize same-sex marriage in Rhode Island, House Judiciary Chairwoman Edith Ajello was hoping on Thursday to have her committee vote on the bill next week.

“The next logical step would be a committee vote,” said Ajello on the day after the hearing that drew hundreds of people on both sides of the deep divide to the State House for a high-pitched rally and hearing. “I would hope that it would be next week,” she said.

But the state’s openly gay House Speaker Gordon D. Fox, who along with Ajello is a cosponsor of this year’s same-sex marriage legislation, said next week is “too soon” to bring the issue to a vote.

“I think next week is premature.” Fox said in an interview.

“Edie wants to move quickly. She’s a new chair ... and she wants to push things so they can get through their agenda. But we, in leadership, myself and the majority leader, really need to talk to a few people,” Fox said. “We actually have to have some conversations with the Senate, with the governor’s office, and that is going to take some time.”

Fox said the leadership also needs to “digest” the hours of testimony. House spokesman Larry Berman reported that 197 people signed up to testify, including 137 in favor of same-sex marriage and 60 against.

Ajello had said she was confident the bill would clear her 14-member committee with at least 8 votes. But when asked later in the day if he was concerned he might not have the votes to get the bill through the House, Fox said: “That’s always a concern.

“I mean this is, in a lot of eyes, a controversial issue, and there has been a lot of pressure from a lot of

powerful folks for and against, and anytime you have that mix, you have to make sure you have your votes, and that's one of the things that needs to be talked about quite frankly," he said. "I'll put it right on the table."

Among the powerful forces he cited was the Catholic Church, which has been at the forefront of the opposition campaign.

"You don't put something out there to fail if you can avoid that by taking some time to talk to people and making sure you have everything lined up," Fox said candidly. "Rushing into some things is not the best strategy."

Fox said he has also heard that some House members, aware that Senate President M. Teresa Paiva Weed opposes same-sex marriage, are concerned the Senate will not even consider the bill after they have put themselves on the line with a vote that could make them vulnerable to attack by many in their own communities.

"There are concerns and it would be untrue to say otherwise," Fox said.

On a more pragmatic level, both Fox and Rep. Arthur Handy, D-Cranston, said they also need to evaluate the concerns that Rep. Michael Marcello, the vice chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, and others have raised about adequacy of the protections in the law for religious institutions and the entities they control, such as Providence College.

The bill already has a religious-liberty provision, but Marcello, who is a lawyer and a Catholic, said it "only protects churches and religious institutions regarding the performance, recognition and teachings regarding marriage."

After reading a detailed letter from professors at a number of universities, including the University of Virginia School of Law, Marcello, D-Scituate, said he believes the "the bill could be strengthened to further protect religious institutions, including colleges, from civil lawsuits involving the recognition of [same-gender] marriages in their day-to-day activities." He cited the availability of married student housing to gay couples, as an example.

In their letter, the professors also warned against turning opponents into martyrs. "To impose legal penalties or civil liabilities on a wedding planner who refused to do a same-sex wedding, or on a religious-counseling agency that refuses to provide marriage counseling ... will simply ensure that conservative religious opinion on this issue can repeatedly be aroused to a fever pitch."

The professors suggested Rhode Island make clear that no one working for any of these institutions is required to "solemnize," "treat as valid" or "provide services, accommodations, advantages, facilities, goods or privileges" to anyone, if doing so would cause them to "violate their sincerely held religious beliefs."

But even with this language, Marcello would not say how he would vote.

"I think the bill needs to be improved," he said. "Whether I would vote for it on the House floor remains to be seen."

kgregg@projo.com