

GOVERNMENT

Opponents of Same-Sex Marriage Prepare for Referendum Fight

Religious groups and an Anne Arundel politician are among those against the bill, which passed in the Senate on Thursday.

By **Maggie Clark** February 27, 2011

One day after the Maryland Senate voted to approve same-sex marriage, representatives from national organizations, including the Family Research Council and the National Organization for Marriage, were in Annapolis lending their support to the fight against same-sex marriage in the state.

Opponents on Friday were well organized and said Thursday's vote in the Senate does not represent the opinion of the majority of Marylanders.

"There's no question that the numbers are there to overturn this...we believe that there are a lot of people who are sitting timid and quiet and not speaking out on this issue. We're not going to fail," said Rev. Pierre Bynum, chaplain for the Family Research Council and a Maryland resident.

Family Research Council leaders are expecting Maryland's churches "will be animated and mobilized," and will be the source of most of the 53,650 signatures needed to get same-sex marriage on the 2012 ballot.

"There are churches in our coalition that have 20,000 people in their church, so it's a question of just circulating it (a petition) among a few churches," Bynum said.

Even though the outcome in the House of Delegates is far from certain, preparation for a 2012 referendum began the same day the House Judiciary Committee heard testimony on the Religious Freedom and Civil Marriage Protection Act, the House's version of marriage equality legislation. Gov. Martin O'Malley has said he would sign marriage equality legislation into law if it passes both legislative chambers.

The National Organization for Marriage, a chief organizer for passage of Proposition 8 in California, which defined marriage in the California Constitution as between a man and a woman, already has its sights set on organizing a referendum in Maryland.

"We expect to take a major role if the House votes wrong and the governor signs it," said Maggie Gallagher, chairman of the board of the National Organization for Marriage.

"I think this is going to end up with the people of Maryland if the House passes it. There were polls in California that showed that Prop 8 would fail by 10 points. But we're really confident that we can get this issue to the public and that the people of Maryland will do what people in every other state have done," Gallagher said.

According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, voters have rejected same-sex marriage in 30 states. In Washington state, voters approved domestic partnership rights.

The Maryland Constitution provides voters the right to collect signatures to reject any act by the Maryland General Assembly in a popular vote. Referendums are notoriously difficult to organize because each person's name and address must be exactly the same on the petition sheet as they appear on their voter registration card.

In the House of Delegates, Delegate Don Dwyer Jr., R-Anne Arundel, is leading the charge against same-sex marriage with a bill that would define marriage between a man and a woman in the state's Constitution.

At a news conference Friday, Dwyer said he and supporters are already organizing a referendum on the chance that the House of Delegates approves same-sex marriage. The announcement met with cheers from about 50 opponents of same-sex marriage who gathered in the lobby of the Lowe House Office Building to hear Dwyer and others speak on the issue.

The House Judiciary Committee heard hours of testimony Friday on both sides of the same-sex marriage debate. Supporters and opponents lined the hallways of the Lowe House Office Building and overflow crowds listened to testimony via live stream.

Irene Huskens, a Prince George's County police officer and a marriage rights supporter, told potential voters to "do what's right."

"I would like to say to the voters, I'm not asking any church, religion or God to give me holy matrimony. I'm asking to be recognized as a citizen. Let me go to a civil servant, like a justice of the peace, and get a marriage certificate and get married if I want to and to whom I want to," Huskens said.

The House of Delegates Judicial Committee will vote on the issue next week. The bill would then move to the House of Delegates, where its passage is uncertain.



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