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Gay marriage faces trouble in Md. House committee

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Associated Press

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ANNAPOLIS, Md.

The effort to legalize gay marriage in Maryland stalled suddenly Tuesday when a pair of delegates withheld their votes in exchange for more school funding.

Delegate Jill Carter, D-Baltimore, and Delegate Tiffany Alston, D-Prince George's, want school funds restored in Gov. Martin O'Malley's budget plan before they will vote for the gay marriage bill. The two skipped a morning vote, and forced House leaders to delay a second.

Although co-sponsors of the gay marriage bill — including Carter and Alston — hold a majority of seats on the House Judiciary Committee, a successful vote no longer seems guaranteed.

"We think it's a fundamental right for our children to get their money for education, the majority of our constituency sees it as a primary issue," Carter said. "We think it's as least as important as the issue of same-sex marriage that is being pushed through so quickly."

O'Malley, a Democrat, cut \$94 million to public schools in his budget plan, including \$15 million for Baltimore and \$21 million for Prince George's County. The Maryland Legislature must approve a budget by the end of its 90-day session in April.

While never a lock in Maryland's General Assembly, same-sex marriage appeared on its way to approval after the Senate voted 25-21 to send it to the House. O'Malley has said he would sign the bill that would make Maryland the sixth state to allow same-sex marriage.

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House Speaker Michael Busch, D-Anne Arundel, met with the two lawmakers asking for more education money in a closed-door meeting for one and a half hours. Speaking after the meeting, Busch said he would not trade budget requests for gay-marriage votes.

Busch was uncertain whether the move from Carter and Alston would kill the effort to legalize same-sex marriage this year.

"I can't project that," he said.

Gay marriage opponents were ebullient Tuesday evening.

"I can tell you this, they don't have the votes. If they had the votes, we'd be voting tonight," said Delegate Don Dwyer, R-Anne Arundel, who is coordinating opposition in the House.

House Judiciary Committee Joseph Vallario, D-Prince George's, planned a morning vote on the measure, but put it off to later Tuesday after Carter and Alston skipped the meeting.

While Vallario waited, gay marriage supporters including Delegate Kathleen Dumais, D-Montgomery and Delegate Luiz Simmons, D-Montgomery, searched for Carter and Alston.

Republican opponents, meanwhile, heckled them.

"Lou, look under the desk," said Delegate Michael Smigiel, R-Cecil.

Vallario delayed voting a second time Tuesday evening, after it was apparent supporters did not have the numbers needed to pass the measure. He did not say when a vote would be held.

Simmons, a gay marriage supporter and one of the bill's co-sponsors, blamed House and Senate leaders for the bill's troubles.

"You've got to keep in mind, the leadership has never been behind this bill, so the direction has been kind of rudderless," Simmons said. "They have allowed the bill to go forward, but the bill has no leadership spine."

Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller and Vallario oppose gay marriage. Busch plans to vote for the bill if it makes it out of committee, a spokeswoman said Tuesday.

The committee could be where gay marriage opponents kill the measure, Simmons said. If the bill does not clear committee, it will likely fail in the House if supporters attempt to skirt the committee vote via a petition, he said.

"Even though I support same-sex marriage, I would be very, very concerned about basically violating the process and bringing forward a bill without 12 votes," Simmons said. "Either we have them or we don't and sometimes process as important, if not more important, than the outcome."

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