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Posted at 3:18 PM ET, 03/ 4/2011

House panel passes same-sex marriage bill

By John Wagner

A previously stalled bill to allow same-sex marriages in Maryland was approved by a House committee Friday, but only after the panel's chairman, who rarely votes, augmented the final tally.

The 12-to-10 vote by the House Judiciary Committee sends the bill to the floor next week for what is expected to be a dramatic debate on the highest-profile issue being considered in the General Assembly this year. Twelve votes were needed from the panel for a favorable recommendation.

The Senate approved the bill 25 to 21 last week, and Gov. Martin O'Malley (D) has encouraged the House to follow suit.

The committee vote came after an amendment to offer civil unions to gay couples instead of marriage failed on a 10-to-10 vote. The amendment was offered by Del. Tiffany T. Alston (D-Prince George's), a co-sponsor of the original same-sex marriage bill.

Alston then voted against the same-sex marriage bill itself, saying her vote was "for my constituents."

"I know that my community does not like the bill," the freshman delegate said.

Alston and Del. Jill Carter (D-Baltimore) temporarily derailed the committee's consideration of the bill on Tuesday by skipping a planned voting session. Carter voted for the measure Friday.

Supporters had been counting on both Alston and Carter to reach the 12 votes needed to send the bill to the floor with a favorable recommendation.

Without Alston's vote, House Judiciary Chairman Joseph F. Vallario (D-Prince George's) provided the final vote. Aides said he was not available for an interview afterward.

Republicans complained again Friday that the bill is being rushed through the chamber, and noted how rare it is for Vallario to vote. Del. Michael D. Smigiel Sr. (R-Cecil) said he was not surprised.

"The chairman did what he was told," Smigiel said. "That's why he's chairman."

By John Wagner | March 4, 2011; 3:18 PM ET

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