



Maryland House committee passes gay marriage bill

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ANNAPOLIS, Md. — A state House committee on Friday narrowly backed legislation to give same-sex couples in Maryland the same full marriage rights as heterosexuals.

The 12-10 vote by the House Judiciary sends the bill, which already has been approved by the state Senate, to the full House of Delegates, which could vote on the measure next week. Gov. Martin O'Malley has said he would sign the measure if it passes.

The bill's advance capped a week of dramatic uncertainty in the panel, where the bill stalled when two delegates skipped a vote because they objected to the fast-paced process and pressure from House leaders not to amend the legislation.

"This process has not been what it should be," said Delegate Tiffany Alston, D-Prince George's, who had signed on as a co-sponsor of the bill but ended up voting against it. "This has not been the deliberative process that we normally engage in in this committee."

Alston, who was one of the two delegates who skipped a scheduled vote on Tuesday, said her constituents did not support gay marriage, but would support civil unions. She introduced an amendment for civil unions that was rejected, and she ended up voting against the bill, which was approved without any amendments.

"To tell us that we are not allowed to amend something if we earnestly believe we should be able to is wrong, and to tell us we have to vote a certain way is wrong," Alston said.

Delegate Jill Carter, D-Baltimore, the other House member whose absence from a scheduled vote earlier this week stalled the measure, ultimately voted for the bill. Carter also held the deciding vote on Alston's amendment to allow civil unions for same-sex couples instead of marriage, which failed when she abstained.

Carter said she was never against the bill, but she said she opposed what she described as a lack of adequate debate and instructions from House leaders not to introduce amendments.

"It's difficult when there's a conflict between what you believe in — the issue, the bill — and you then vehemently disagree with the process that is being used to get it passed," Carter said after the vote.

Republicans also objected to the process, saying the House was shying away from doing its own work on the measure out of concern the Senate would not accept any changes.

GOP supporters of the civil unions amendment argued that the majority was only making it more difficult for those they're trying to help, because gay marriage opponents believe they will be able to petition the measure, if it becomes law, onto the 2012 ballot for state voters to decide.

"It is a bridge too far, and by doing that, you are going to destine the same folks that are looking for these rights, you are going to destine them to the ash heap of being defeated by the people in this state who vote it down by referendum who probably wouldn't even bother to take it to referendum if you offered them civil unions," Delegate Mike McDermott, R-Worcester, said.

A referendum petition against an act passed by the General Assembly would require signatures adding up to 3 percent of qualified voters who cast votes for governor in the last election to sign it, or about 55,736 people.

Morgan Meneses-Sheets, executive director for Equality Maryland, an advocacy group for gay and lesbian Marylanders, described the committee vote as an important step forward while acknowledging the vote could be close in the full House.

"It's not a done deal, so we're just going to keep working," Meneses-Sheets said.

The bill includes protections for religious groups and institutions to keep them from being forced to participate in gay weddings. The measure also would grant the same title and rights to same-sex couples as married straight couples.

Republicans tried to amend the bill several times on Friday.

Delegate Neil Parrott, R-Washington, who criticized the bill for changing the definition of marriage, briefly made what he described as a tongue-in-cheek amendment to legalize incest.

"I don't see any problem with incest in marriage if we are going to go ahead and allow something that hasn't been allowed ever in all of human history by allowing one man to marry another man or a woman to marry a woman," Parrott said, before withdrawing the amendment. "I think this is the same type of thing that we're talking about."

Read Senate Bill 116: <http://mlis.state.md.us/2011rs/billfile/SB0116.htm>

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