

The anti-gay marriage campaign is no longer knocking on the Pacific Northwest's door. With the Washington House's recent approval of a bill barring same-sex marriages, it's got that door firmly ajar.

"We as a community need to be on guard," warns Carol Sterling, executive director of the Seattle-based Privacy Fund of Washington, which promotes the civil and political rights of lesbians and gay men. Privacy Fund lobbied against the restrictive measure.

Though Senate leaders say the bill will be allowed to die, Sterling says it is critical that the gay and lesbian community get acquainted with the marriage issue.

"We don't even really know where the gay and lesbian community stands on the whole marriage question," she says. "We need to start talking about that."

Despite the Senate roadblock, albeit a large one, opponents of equal marriage for same-gender couples are declaring victory following the 66-30 vote on House Bill 2262 in the Republican-dominated House.

The bill stated, in part: "It is a compelling interest of the state of Washington to reaffirm its historical commitment to the institution of marriage as a union between a man and a woman and its fundamental role in the procreation and development of children."

The Feb. 10 vote generally fell along party lines. Only one Republican, Rep. Don Carlson (R-Vancouver), joined Democrats in opposing the bill. Five Democrats banded with the majority of GOP representatives in voting in favor of the legislation.

The bill was sent to the Senate Law and Justice Committee, where Democratic leaders said it would not receive a hearing, effectively killing the measure.

"We have been monitoring the situation very closely and our coalition members across Washington have been calling their lawmakers to voice their opposition to the bill," said Jan Bianchi, immediately following House passage of the bill. She is a Seattle attorney and president of Hands-Off Washington, a grass-roots organization committed to combating discrimination.

"We feel confident that the bill won't even get a hearing and will be killed in committee," said Bianchi, who nonetheless admitted it was "frustrating that right-wing zealots have taken over our House."

HB 2262 was sponsored by Rep. Bill Thompson (R-Everett) as an effort to head off a pending Hawaii court ruling that could lead to legalized marriages for same-gender couples.

Earlier this session, HB 2262 simply prohibited same-sex marriages. Gov. Mike Lowry, a liberal Democrat, vowed to veto the measure, and in response proponents amended the bill to add a referendum clause. That meant if the bill had gained full

An emotional issue

The battle for sexual minority rights flares up on the marriage front

by Inga Sorensen

legislative approval, it would have automatically bypassed a gubernatorial veto and been placed before voters in November.

Lowry, who recently announced he would not seek re-election, heralded the Senate's decision to kill the bill.

Prior to the Senate's action—or inaction, as the case may be—Sterling said: "We are pretty confident the bill will not make it through the Senate—I say that with every part of my body crossed. If it somehow *does* pass, then it's all hands on deck [because] we're talking about another intense and costly campaign. If it doesn't pass, I believe the bill will be back next session."

She added: "This is a tough issue. Unlike job or housing protections, which many people support for gays and lesbians, marriage strikes a certain emotional chord. Many of those folks who typically support our civil rights draw the line at same-sex marriages."

Still, there appears to be support out there—at least if the debate among House members is any indication.

"Does love between a man and a man offend us more than hatred between a man and a man?" Rep. Mary Lou Dickerson (D-Seattle) asked during the debate. "This is a vote between love and hate...between courage and fear."

"Think how you would feel if there was a law prohibiting you from marrying the person you love," added Rep. Debbie Regala (D-Tacoma).

Regala married a Filipino man three decades ago. At one time, she noted, it would have been illegal for her to marry him.

Some lawmakers said the bill was unnecessary because state law does not currently recognize same-sex marriages, while several House members said the bill's language sounded much like religious doctrine. Dickerson, who was raised a Catholic, said during the debate: "It's none of the state's business whether people marry for the purpose of procreation."

Rep. Brian Hatfield (D-Montesano), meanwhile,

left the debate in tears, saying the issue brought back a painful memory of a cousin who committed suicide several years ago. Hatfield, who voted against HB 2262, says he had refused to be a pallbearer at the funeral when he learned that his cousin was gay.

"I'm so sad when I look back and see what kind of a person I was," he says. "And I think, hey, if a redneck like me can see the kind of pain discrimination causes, anybody should be able to."

That is the hope of John Wilkinson, coordinator of the Legal Marriage Alliance of Washington. LMA, which was founded three months ago, functions as a local resource for information on same-sex marriages and assists existing organizations by sharing information and coordinating strategies.

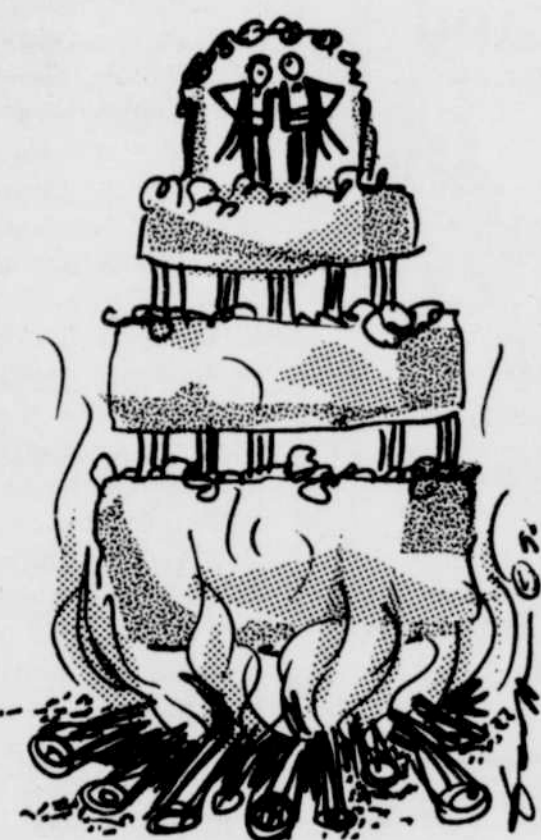
Wilkinson says LMA's immediate focus is to prepare the sexual minorities community and general public for the impact of the Hawaii marriage decision, which is expected in July. In anticipation of that ruling, nearly 20 states have proposed measures to prohibit equal marriage rights for gay and lesbian couples.

"What we try and do is work to educate in concentric circles, starting first with our own community, and then moving outward to our traditional nongay allies, and then to what I would call the persuadables," he says.

"Persuadables are people like my co-workers," explains Wilkinson, who has been with his partner for a quarter century. "I've worked at Eastman Kodak for 21 years and many of my co-workers vote Republican. They are not the types of people you would think would be supportive of my right to marry, yet they are, because they've gotten to know me personally."

"I think one of the things the gay and lesbian community doesn't do enough is ask for support. We have a tendency to assume someone is 'for us' or 'against us.' We can't afford to make those assumptions."

As for the House's recent action, Wilkinson says he's pleased by the 66-30 vote.



"I'm amazed we got as many votes as we did," he admits. "If you think about how little this whole issue has been discussed—by anybody—then 30 votes is something to be thrilled about and build upon."

According to Wilkinson, LMA is also attempting to build support within the queer community. LMA sent an estimated 150 notices to gay and lesbian groups throughout Washington asking if they'd like further information about same-sex marriages.

"The response has not been very good," he says, quickly adding, "I think that has a lot to do with the timing. We sent out the notices right before the holidays, and [HB 2262] was nowhere in sight. I think interest will greatly increase in light of what has happened."

Wilkinson will be the first to admit, however, that same-sex marriage remains a somewhat controversial topic within the queer community.

"There are those who say that marriage is a failed patriarchal institution, so why should we want any part of it," he says. "I say that this is about equal access and equal rights. I also firmly believe that same-sex marriages—and the love and commitment we bring to our relationships—can strengthen the institution for everyone."

Bonnie Tinker of the Portland-based Love Makes a Family Inc. agrees.

"We are very clear that marriage is not for everyone. But I adamantly believe that this is a matter of equal access. Same-gender couples should have the same right as heterosexual couples to marry," she says.

Love Makes a Family, which promotes the rights and visibility of lesbian and gay families, is part of a fledgling coalition whose goal is to educate Oregonians around the marriage issue.

It is a dialogue that has been woefully lacking in Oregon, even though initiatives poised for the November 1996 ballot call for a prohibition on same-sex marriages. The Oregon Citizens Alliance is sponsoring ballot initiatives that bar civil rights protections based on sexual orientation, as well as the recognition of "homosexual marital status [and] spousal benefits."

Meanwhile, in Washington, Bianchi says Hands Off Washington has no plans to take a proactive stance on same-sex marriages.

"Certainly if this gets on the ballot we will oppose it," she says. "But otherwise this is not part of our agenda. I think there are many people in the gay and lesbian community who are more concerned with employment protections, for instance.... We'll leave it up to the Legal Marriage Alliance to handle the marriage discussion."

For more information about the Legal Marriage Alliance of Washington, call (206) 689-6280; to contact Love Makes a Family, call (503) 228-3892.

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