

NATIONAL news

passed the act for a decade now, but it has died each year because the Republican-controlled Senate has taken no action. Given the Assembly's long-standing support for the act and Pataki's call for passage, all the Senate needs to do is take up the measure this year, and it would become law.

"We believe in equal rights and equal protections for all people," Bruno said at a press conference after Pataki's speech. "We're open [to the act]. It's on our agenda."

MISSISSIPPI

A hate crimes amendment is among more than 1,000 bills that have been presented by Mississippi lawmakers for the 2002 session, which began Jan. 8.

Last year Democratic state Rep. Erik R. Fleming introduced legislation to add protection for people attacked because of their sexual orientation or age. It died in committee, but the issue of people targeted because of their age was introduced in a separate bill, which passed.

Fleming has introduced House Bill 171, which mirrors 2001's House Bill 162 in context. If passed, it would add sexual orientation and age to the Mississippi hate crimes law in July.

"The Judiciary B Committee didn't even discuss the bill in 2001 when it was presented," says Jody Renaldo, Equality Mississippi executive director. "Hopefully this time they will remember our previous conversations and our current ongoing conversations and give this bill the due attention it deserves."

Equality Mississippi was founded in March 2000 because of a hate crime. A close friend of Renaldo's was kidnapped, beaten and strangled to death and his body was dumped in the woods simply because he was gay.

"Anyone that says that sexual orientation should not be added to the current state hate crime law is fooling themselves," Renaldo says. "While I agree that in a perfect world, murder is murder and the same 'eye for an eye' sentence should be extended to all murderers, that isn't always the case."

According to Renaldo, hate crimes laws across the country are a significant deterrent. If people know they could face a double sentence, they tend to contemplate whether to carry out such a crime, he believes.

"Regardless of a person's sexual orientation, color, religion, nationality, we all pay taxes and we all vote," Renaldo says. "Our organization's 6,000-plus members all over the state are definitely keeping an eye on this bill and will remember its outcome when it's time to vote for new lawmakers."

NATIONAL

President Bush signed a measure Dec. 21 allowing the District of Columbia government to fund a program giving domestic partners of city employees access to health benefits purchased at their own expense. The Human Rights Campaign praised his decision.

"The president's signature culminates a huge victory that has resulted from nearly a decade of hard work on this issue," political director Winnie Stachelberg said. "We applaud our allies in Congress for passing this historic legislation and President Bush for signing it into law."

The D.C. Health Care Benefits Expansion Act was approved in 1992. But for nearly a



Democratic state Rep. Erik R. Fleming has reintroduced hate crimes legislation in Mississippi

decade, Congress blocked the district from using any local or federal funds to implement the law.

The fiscal year 2002 District of Columbia appropriations bill lifted this prohibition. The district now joins 130 other state and local governments nationwide offering domestic partner benefits for their public employees.

Bridgestone/Firestone Inc., which announced Nov. 18 an expansion of its diversity marketing efforts to include the sexual minorities community, is now under attack by the American Family Association.

The anti-gay organization issued an action alert Dec. 13, blasting the tire maker for appealing to "homosexual lovers, cross-dressers and gender-confused customers." President Don Wildmon said, "Bridgestone is selectively recruiting customers based solely on bedroom behavior—men who have sex with men,



women who have sex with women, and those who aren't sure what sex they are."

Bridgestone/Firestone has entered into a sponsorship agreement with Gay.com and PlanetOut.com. Its marketing efforts also will include targeted advertising with Triangle Television Network, Out, Genre, Curve and the Advocate.

"We are proud to be the first tire company with a national marketing effort directed toward this important segment of the U.S. population," said Michael Fluck, the company's Internet and diversity marketing manager. The move is part of a broader effort including the launch of a Spanish-language version of TireSafety.com, an Internet site designed to improve highway safety.

The Human Rights Campaign is urging people to thank Bridgestone/Firestone for its forward-thinking initiatives. E-mail should be sent to diversity@bfusa.com. [E]

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