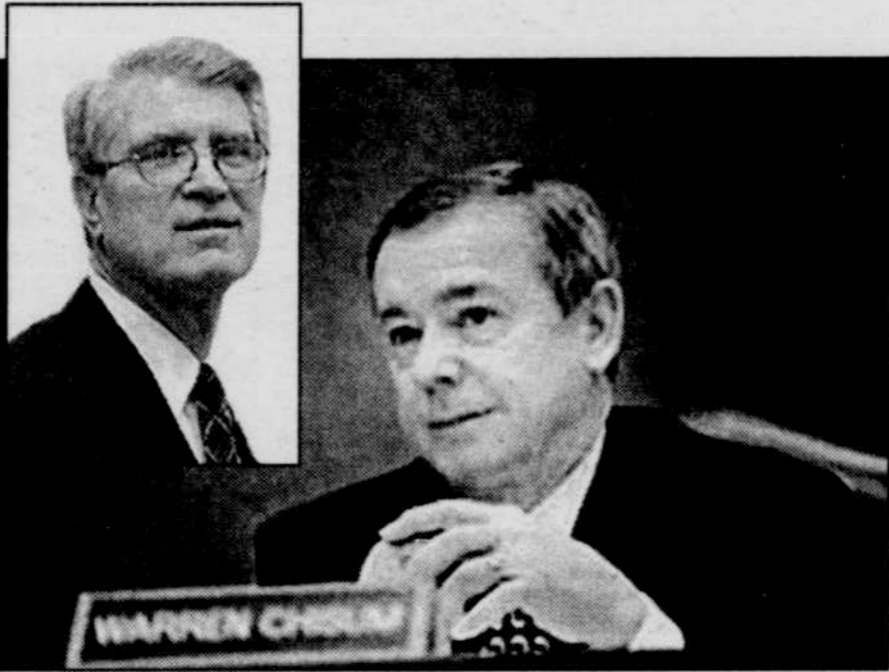


NATIONAL news

the Rules Committee of the House, where it was stalled for nine months.

In March the bill was moved to the House Judiciary Committee, where it was voted out successfully 15-5 on Nov. 12. With final passage in the House by a vote of 118-79, it was presented to Republican Gov. Mark Schweiker, who signed it Dec. 3.

"The people of Pennsylvania don't believe in hate," said Mara Keisling, Pennsylvania Gender Rights Coalition co-chairwoman. "With the help of a fully committed coalition...we were able to convince the state Legislature of the need to protect transgender as well as lesbian, gay and bisexual people."



State Reps. Warren Chisum and Robert Talton (inset) already have introduced anti-gay bills for the next session of the Texas Legislature

TENNESSEE

Cracker Barrel's board of directors voted Nov. 26 to add sexual orientation to its written nondiscrimination policy. The change ends a decade-long struggle that began when the company issued a policy of firing employees who failed to "demonstrate normal heterosexual values."



William C. Thompson

The board of the Old Lebanon-based CBRL Group Inc., the parent company of Cracker Barrel Old Country Stores and Logan's Roadhouse restaurants, voted unanimously to change the nondiscrimination policy after its annual shareholder meeting. This was the 10th time such a resolution was put before shareholders.

"This is the result of a lengthy campaign by my office and the trustees of several of the city's pension systems," said William C. Thompson of the New York City Employees Retirement System, which sponsored the resolution. "Working together, we hope to continue to push additional companies to enact other nondiscriminatory policies in the future."

Cracker Barrel drew national attention in 1991 when it instituted a policy calling for firing employees "whose sexual preferences fail to demonstrate normal heterosexual values which have been the foundation of families in our society." At least 11 workers were terminated as a result. The company's blatant discrimination—which was legal in the states where it occurred and remains legal under federal law—touched off a wave protests and boycotts.

Cracker Barrel later revoked the policy, which it once described as a "well-intentioned overreaction to the perceived values of our customers," but until now had not expressly protected gay employees from workplace discrimination. In fact, the company recommended that shareholders vote against the resolution again this year.

Cracker Barrel was one of only three companies to earn a zero on the Human Rights Campaign's 2002 Corporate Equality Index, which rates major U.S. businesses on their policies toward queer employees, consumers and investors. Another company that had scored a zero, Lockheed Martin Corp. of Bethesda, Md., announced last month that it would add sexual orientation to its non-

discrimination policy and begin providing health insurance benefits to gay employees' domestic partners.

TEXAS

Reportedly emboldened by the November election results, right-wing legislators already have begun their attacks on the sexual minorities community, filing two anti-gay bills for the next session.

The first is a ban on the recognition of same-sex marriages or unions from other states. House Bill 38 was introduced by state Rep. Warren Chisum.

The second and far more serious bill would ban gay, lesbian and bi people from serving as foster parents. House Bill 194 was introduced by state Rep. Robert Talton.

"Both bills have the potential of having a huge impact on GLBT Texans," said Randall Ellis, Lesbian Gay Rights Lobby of Texas executive director. "We are developing our response to these unnecessary and cruel attacks on our community."

CALIFORNIA

Assembly Speaker Pro Tem Christine Kehoe, D-San Diego, has reintroduced a bill to prohibit the state from contracting with businesses that discriminate in the benefits offered to their employees with domestic partners as compared to their employees with spouses. It was the first measure she introduced for the 2003 legislative session, which commenced Dec. 2.

"This legislation not only ensures that Californians are not subsidizing discriminatory workplace policies but also gives businesses a positive incentive for providing equal benefits," said Geoffrey Kors, California Alliance for Pride and Equality executive director. "It is expected that the incentive of being eligible to do business with California will result in thousands of companies changing their policies."

The bill is modeled on San Francisco's Equal Benefits Ordinance, in place since 1997. Other California jurisdictions with similar requirements include Berkeley, Oakland, Los Angeles and San Mateo County.

About 4,500 businesses nationwide, including one-third of the Fortune 500, offer domestic partner health benefits. The San Francisco law is credited with encouraging companies employing more than 2 million workers to change their policies and provide equal benefits.

A version of Assembly Bill 17 was introduced late in the 2002 legislative session and successfully passed two committees and the Senate floor. It is anticipated that this measure will be addressed in February. [E]

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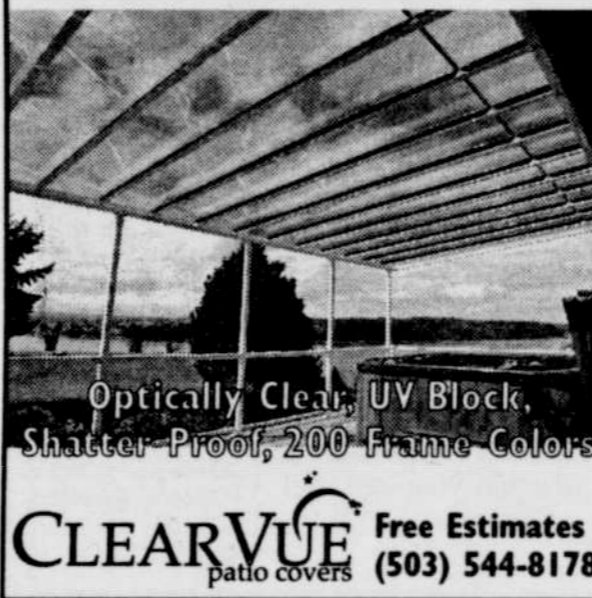
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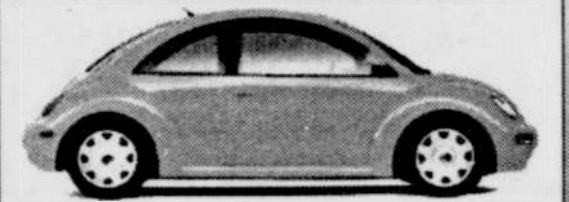
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