

The odds of a passing the anti-gay Federal Marriage Amendment got a little longer last month.

The key element was word from U.S. Rep. F. James Sensenbrenner Jr., R-Wis., that he opposes such an amendment, at least for now. The story appeared Aug. 25 in the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*.

This fairly obscure congressman is important because he chairs the House Judiciary Committee, which has jurisdiction over proposed amendments to the Constitution.

The conservative Sensenbrenner is not exactly a champion of gay rights. In the article he made clear that he opposes marriages and civil unions for same-sex couples. He supported the 1996 Defense of Marriage Act, which defines marriage as between a man and a woman for federal purposes, and believes that legislation is sufficient.

Amending the Constitution "is very strong medicine," he said. "It's been done only 27 times in over 200 years."

Ten of those were the Bill of Rights, adopted in 1791, which many states demanded as a condition for ratifying the Constitution. Two amendments, those dealing with prohibition and the sale of alcohol, canceled each other out. Several others were of a technical nature, changing the line of presidential succession and the date of inauguration.

Tammy Baldwin, the only lesbian member of Congress, also represents a Wisconsin district and sits on the Judiciary Committee. The Democrat called Sensenbrenner's statement "very significant."

Both she and former Wisconsin Republican congressman Steve Gunderson are in long-term relationships. Their example and quiet

RUNAWAY BRIDE

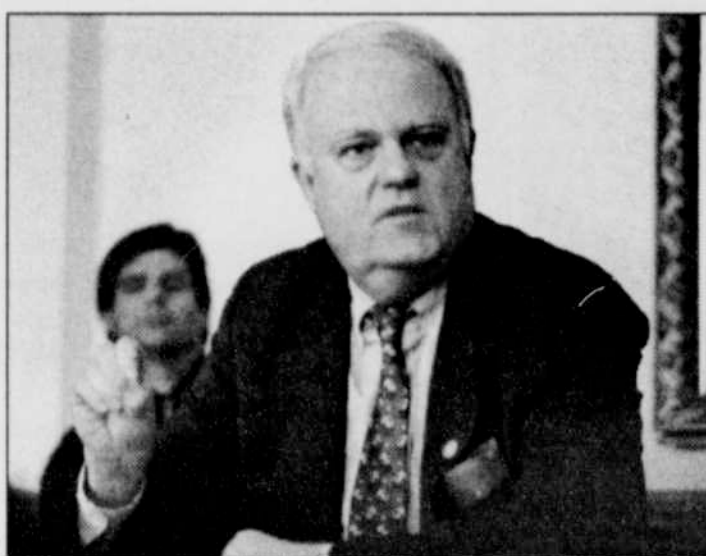
Federal Marriage Amendment prospects dim by Bob Roehr

lobbying may also have affected Sensenbrenner's decision.

The chairman's opposition makes it unlikely that hearings will be scheduled on the Federal Marriage Amendment. That makes it much more difficult for House Republican leaders to bring the measure up for a vote on the floor, even if only as a marker for interest groups to use on their rating scorecards.

Reinforcing the case against the amendment was an Aug. 21 column in *The Washington Post* by former U.S. Rep. Bob Barr, R-Ga., the author of DOMA. He argued: "Marriage is a quintessential state issue. The Defense of Marriage Act goes as far as is necessary in codifying the federal legal status and parameters of marriage. A constitutional amendment is both unnecessary and needlessly intrusive and punitive...the Constitution is no place for forcing social policies on states."

U.S. Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, has announced that he will hold a hearing on the Federal Marriage Amendment, likely in September, though no date has yet been set. That subcommittee includes conservative Jon Kyl, R-Ariz., whose support of the amendment was made clear in a policy paper from the



U.S. Rep. F. James Sensenbrenner Jr., R-Wis., opposes a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage

Senate Republican Policy Committee, which he chairs.

Another member is U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., who signed on as a co-sponsor of the amendment in 1999, when he was a member of the House. However, it is unclear whether that was from deep conviction or for political expediency in his upcoming race for the Senate. The then 46-year-old and never-been-married candidate was gay-baited by his Democratic opponent during the 2002 campaign to succeed Strom Thurmond.

The Democratic side of the subcommittee includes Russell Feingold of Wisconsin, Ted Kennedy of Massachusetts, Charles Schumer of New York and Richard Durbin of Illinois, all of whom are strong supporters of the sexual minorities community. So insiders predict the hearing should be fair. [E]

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NEW HOMOPHOBES ON THE BLOCK

Anti-gay rhetoric got a new mouthpiece when Tony Perkins was named as president of the Family Research Council. He took over Sept. 1.



Tony Perkins

FRC is the Washington, D.C., political arm of James Dobson's Focus on the Family. Its most recent president, Ken Connor, resigned in July for personal reasons, though speculation is that he was not sufficiently anti-gay for Dobson.

Perkins has no such problem. The Louisiana legislator successfully led the fight against repeal of the state sodomy law in 2001. "This legislation has nothing to do with what married couples do in their bedrooms. It has everything to do with legitimizing homosexuality," he said.

He is perhaps best known for pushing passage of the 1997 "Covenant Marriages Laws," a kind of optional super-marriage that requires premarital counseling and sets up tougher standards for divorce. He also championed legislation that tightly regulates abortion clinics and requires public schools to install filtering software to prevent students from accessing pornography and other materials deemed objectionable.

Perkins said going to FRC "will allow me to address the issues I'm most passionate about." Among the most immediate will be "defending the sanctity of marriage and keeping it to one man and one woman."

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