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NORTHWEST news

SENATE PASSES CIVIL UNIONS

Bill needs House vote to become official

by Jaymee R. Cuti

Activists for queer causes ate cake July 8 at the Oregon Capitol to celebrate a Senate vote passing Senate Bill 1000, which would create civil unions and add sexual minorities to the list of protected groups in anti-discrimination policy.

The bill, backed by Gov. Ted Kulongoski, now faces a hurried push for a vote in the Republican-led House.

Sen. Margaret Carter, a Democrat from Portland, set the tone for what would amount to

who voted against same-sex marriage in November by passing Ballot Measure 36.

Democratic Sen. Ginny Burdick of Portland rejected the idea that voters marked their disapproval for civil unions when they voted for Measure 36.

"This bill is a compromise," Burdick said, as she recalled some pro-Measure 36 constituents saying they would favor civil unions but not marriage for same-sex couples.

Arguments for SB 1000 took on a flavor of honoring civil rights.

"Who are we to deny an individual the legitimacy of their humanity?" asked an impassioned Sen. Ben Westlund of Tumalo, Republican co-sponsor of the bill.

Some Christians resolved their moral dilemma by calling civil unions a contract, not blessed by God. In its current state, SB 1000 would allow most of the rights married people enjoy, with few exceptions that carry into federal law, such as joint tax filing, immigration status and taxing money transferred between partners.

Among those voting for SB 1000 were beliefs that civil unions are only a matter of time.

"This issue has been solved. It's just the date that we are debating," said Sen. Ryan Deckert,

arguments between morality and civil rights, by belting out a gospel-style rendition of "Bridge Over Troubled Water" before debates began.

Two hours of debates culminated in 17 Democrats and two Republicans passing the bill. In attendance were dozens of supporters clad in light blue T-shirts reading "Support SB 1000."

Many opposing senators wore their faith on their sleeve, quoting Scripture and arguing that religion prevented them from voting civil unions into law.

Republican Sen. Jeff Kruse of Roseburg warned his colleagues, "This bill is another step down the road to Armageddon."

He questioned whether pedophiles will seek special rights after protections are granted for bisexuals and transgender people.

"This is dangerous ground, colleagues," he said.

Sen. Rick Metsger, a Democrat from Mount Hood, agreed the bill treads into morality issues but voted for it. He said, "None of us has a patent on righteousness" and questioned the morality of denying rights to sexual minorities.

Kruse and other Republicans argued that civil unions undermine the "will of the people"



From left, Sens. Alan Bates, D-Ashland; Frank Morse, R-Albany; and Ben Westlund, R-Tumalo, meet well-wishers at the Capitol.



Supporters greet senators as they showed up for work July 8.

a Democrat from Beaverton. "This country has a great, long, messy tradition of voting the right way in civil rights issues. The beat goes on...in securing civil rights for every citizen."

Representatives for Basic Rights Oregon said it will rely on the same method for getting the bill to pass the House as it did in the Senate: pressure from constituents.

"Although we do believe we have the votes, it's really up to constituents to create a massive show of force of support for this bill to their representatives in the House," said Rebekah Kassell, spokeswoman for BRO.

According to Kassell, an in-person meeting with a representative carries more weight than sending an e-mail or making a phone call. BRO is urging supporters of SB 1000 to plan a trip to Salem to meet with lawmakers. The group is organizing a rally on the Capitol steps at 6 p.m. July 20.

"I think if one in every 10 people who cared about this bill took a couple of hours in the next two weeks to make an appointment with their legislators, we would have this thing in the bag," said Kassell.



Basic Rights Oregon Southern Oregon field organizer Jeffrey Foust (middle) helps Willamette Valley field organizer Kristen Flickenger (right) pour celebratory cider.