

The bill found strong opposition from the Oregon Family Council, calling it a "flawed, unpopular piece of legislation." The group supports a reciprocal benefits bill, House Bill 3476, that has not been voted out of committee.

"The majority of Oregonians would like to see some of the benefits of marriage extended to people who are restricted from marriage whether they be any family arrangement, a gay couple or two sisters caring for one another. That's why we're encouraging reciprocal benefits," said Tim Nashif, political director for the council.

According to Nashif, the civil unions described in SB 1000 are not different enough from traditional marriage.

"We think it's marriage. It amends every marriage statute in Oregon to include same-sex couples. We do not think that's what Oregonians had in mind," he said.

Kassell refuted that claim, stating that the bill declines to protect same-sex couples from 1,200 federal rights, including the right to file joint state income tax and the social and cultural religious importance that married couples have.

"We wanted to make clear that people understand that civil unions are different, and while we think this is the best the Legislature can do, it is a significantly diminished status that other couples in Oregon receive," Kassell said.

Although the reciprocal benefits bill would include gay couples, Nashif said his group's objection to SB 1000 is "sexual orientation being written into the law."



Oregon Gov. Ted Kulongoski and Sen. Kate Brown congratulate the assembled crowd.

SB 1000 took several hits in its wording to reach its current form. Its largest compromise came from dropping elementary and secondary education from the list of anti-discrimination protections. This amendment surfaced a common argument from the opposition that such a bill would force educators to teach homosexuality or gay sex in schools.

"Some of these amendments were easy to make because they clarified passages in the bill in a way that inoculated our opponents' arguments completely. Others were more difficult to make, even painful to make," said Kassell. "Nevertheless, we felt we had to do that because it would make the bill a stronger bill and give it a stronger chance of passing."

Kassell said BRO plans to address discrimination in education at a later juncture.

Other amendments to the bill included stating that it would not create an affirmative action program. An amendment also created religious exemptions, giving churches a maximum level of flexibility in making hiring decisions.

"Essentially, it says churches can continue to discriminate any which way they want. It's disturbing that so many churches have advocated for that, but it's never been our intention to interfere with the autonomy of churches—just to make sure people are not discriminated against in the workplace," said Kassell.

Kassell says several factors contributed to the bill's success, from the governor's backing to bipartisan support and, most importantly, citizen involvement, which she expects will carry the bill into law.

"There's a cynicism about politics, but Friday's vote is clear evidence that it is possible to impact the Legislature," she said. "When people really take the time to talk to their representatives, they listen." □

Bill 1000

What does it mean?
Why is it important?
by Sarah Dougher

Senate Bill 1000 proposes to change Oregon law to create civil unions for same-sex couples and prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation in housing, employment, public accommodations and public services. If it passes the House, it means you can't be denied mortgage or a rental, or a job, or a hotel room, or a meal in a restaurant just because you are queer.

You thought you already had these protections? Maybe if you live in one of the few communities that has your well-being as a queer person encoded in law. But if you live outside these communities, think again!

The 19-10 vote July 8 that passed SB 1000 through the Senate and on to an uncertain future in the House of Representatives is significant for a few reasons:

- Queer nondiscrimination bills have been introduced nearly every session for the past 32 years. This is the first time one has passed the Senate.
- The statewide, bipartisan support for the bill in the work of Sens. Kate Brown, D-Portland; Ben Westlund, R-Tumalo; Frank Morse, R-Albany; and Alan Bates, D-Ashland, represents broad coalition building in favor of civil rights.

"Today's vote is a significant step toward ensuring that in Oregon the values of fairness and equality reign over prejudice and fear.... In approving Senate Bill 1000, the Senate has sent a clear message that discrimination against gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people and their families is wrong and has no place in the state of Oregon."

—Basic Rights Oregon executive director Roey Thorpe

"Instead of giving up or being discouraged, as some might have done, BRO immediately resumed working to secure rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Oregonians. BRO refused to back down or tread lightly. Today's vote is the result and shows BRO's unwavering understanding that equality is not something that happens in a flash, but is a long journey with steps both forward and back."

—National Gay and Lesbian Task Force executive director Matt Foreman

"The House has to deliver this bill. Let's go and tell the House, 'We want this bill before we go home.'"

—Oregon Gov. Ted Kulongoski to an assembled group of pro-SB 1000 advocates

"Minorities of all kinds deserve equal rights and acceptance. We must as a society move from hatred and intolerance to tolerance and acceptance. Senate Bill 1000 helps us do that."

—Sen. Alan Bates, D-Ashland

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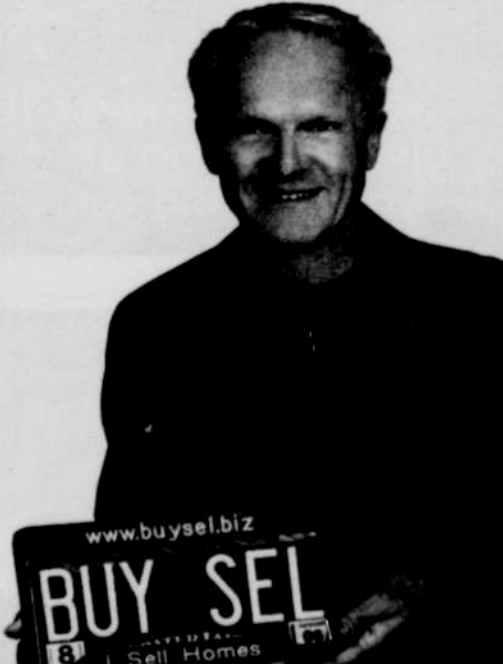


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