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Republican majority in the House, there's a good possibility that some modification will pass, either this year or next.

That's what helped get many of the newly elected Republicans to Montpelier in the first place, and they intend to carry out what they say are their constituents' wishes.

"I'm for the total repeal and nullification of the civil union law," said Rep. Carl Haas, a Republican who represents the city of Rutland. "I pledged that I'd come here and work to repeal and to nullify that law, and anything less would be renegeing on the contract I have with the people that sent me here."

Sheltra, who has been one of the leading opponents of civil unions during the past year, delivered the same message to the Judiciary Committee when she testified on her repeal bill.

"I think it's time we as legislators listened to the people," Sheltra said.

There's disagreement among lawmakers, even those who oppose civil unions, just what voters think about the law.

Even though it was the highest profile issue in the 2000 campaign, voters re-elected Gov. Howard Dean, who signed it into law, and returned a Democratic majority to the Senate that supports it.

Only in the House did Republicans and civil unions opponents take a majority.

"The people back home did not do the same thing in the Senate or the governor's seat," Flory told Sheltra when she testified. "I'm afraid all of us up here have very mixed messages. How do you deal with that mix of mixed messages?"

Sheltra says she believes it's just a matter of time before voters throw out anyone who supports civil unions.

"There's a wave out there," Sheltra said. "I think it will sweep into the Senate and governor's office. We can ride that wave or we can sit back."

With the Republican majority, opponents of gay rights appear to be emboldened in their efforts to roll back the gains the gay and lesbian community has made since the anti-discrimination law was broadened in 1992 to cover sexual orientation.

Sheltra has been quite open about her desire to combat what she describes as the "homosexual agenda." That was the motivation behind her bill on schools.

The notion that schools were helping to promote an agenda on behalf of gay and

lesbian Vermonters became a prominent issue in the gubernatorial campaign last year.

"I think the civil unions issue brought to the forefront that the homosexual agenda is very strongly being brought into the school systems of Vermont," Sheltra was quoted as saying after she introduced her bill.

Not only does she not want homosexuality to be discussed in schools, she would make it illegal to suggest that it is a natural orientation.

"No employee or agent of a school district shall instruct, counsel or advise a student that a homosexual or bisexual orientation is innate or unchangeable," the bill states.

The flurry of bills that would affect gay and lesbian Vermonters' lives has put Rep. William Lippert of Hinesburg in the unenviable position of being the community's spokesman in the Statehouse.

As a member of the Judiciary Committee, he has to listen to most of the proposals and to the testimony of their proponents.

The news media turned to him again after Sheltra introduced her schools bill.

"That bill is built on the premise that somehow the fact that gay and lesbian people are positive, contributing members of society will somehow be a threat to the children of Vermont," he said.

"It's completely unfounded and perpetuates a stereotype and prejudice that does more damage to the children of Vermont than having them know the positive contributions of the gay and lesbian people of Vermont, including in the schools," Lippert said.

It's unclear where any of the legislation is headed this year. There's not a majority in the House Judiciary Committee in favor of repealing civil unions, but there is a majority to modify it in some way. Given that their motivation is because the law is based on sexual orientation, there might be a willingness to act on some of the other issues as well.

There is a fairly widespread belief that the House will not act on those issues until next year, an election year. But there are many conservatives in the House demanding to do something immediately.

For the time being, the Senate has not taken up civil unions in any way and only a couple of the bills have been introduced there.

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divisive nominations in our nation's history, at a time when our country needed healing from the bitterly contested presidential election," said Elizabeth Birch, director of the Human Rights Campaign. "Now is the time for Bush to send assurances that he intends to follow through on his campaign promise to serve all Americans."

"We want to know which John Ashcroft will be doing this job," said David Elliot of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, "the newly reinvented moderate we saw in the confirmation hearings, or the more familiar one who sometimes falls to the right of Jesse Helms." Elliot said the gay community should be watchful of Ashcroft's choices as he fills staff positions in the Justice Department and the White House office of Legal Counsel. "There are indications that some very right wing attorneys will be getting those jobs," he said.

Another of the Attorney General's primary functions is vetting of candidates for federal judge positions. "There are hundreds of vacancies on the federal benches now," said Elliot, "and Ashcroft will play a key role in filling them."

Martin Ornelas-Quintero, executive director of LLEGO, the national Latino gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered organization, is concerned about Ashcroft's Justice Department and immigration issues with regard to HIV status.

"There are significant travel restrictions on people who are HIV-positive," said

Ornelas-Quintero. "They can come in the country, but must have their passports stamped noting their status, and are restricted to staying only a certain period of time."

Under the Clinton administration, LLEGO was able to easily obtain waivers allowing people attending its congresses to enter the country without having their documents permanently labeled with their HIV status.

"The ideal is that HIV would no longer be treated as a communicable disease by the department," said Ornelas-Quintero. However, his concern with Ashcroft is merely holding ground gained under Clinton; he holds little hope of making advances.

Not everyone in the gay community sees Ashcroft's confirmation as unavoidably

dismal.

Bennett, an openly gay member of Bush's transition team and spokesperson for the newly formed Republican Unity Coalition (RUC), said, "A cabinet member is supposed to reflect the president's views. The battles ahead — and there will be battles — will be reflective of the administration as implemented by John Ashcroft."

Bennett said it is incumbent upon the gay community to get its message heard by the administration, which is the mission of the RUC.

"The proof is in the pudding," said Kevin Ivers, spokesperson for the National Log Cabin Republicans. "You can't characterize people's actions before they make them."

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