

the rest of our world

Catholics Challenge Portland DP Ordinance

Portland, ME – The city of Portland and Catholic Charities Maine are poised to clash in federal court over the latest expansion of domestic-partner benefits in Maine's largest city. City councilors amended a municipal ordinance in June to require agencies receiving certain federal funds through the city to offer their employees' domestic partners the same benefits that employees' spouses receive. Catholic Charities Maine says the ordinance is inconsistent with its religious teachings regarding premarital sex and homosexuality. "It's what I call designer discrimination," said John Kerry, the agency's chief executive officer. "They design a program that they know the Salvation Army, the Catholic Church, and maybe some Orthodox Jewish communities or maybe even some other Protestant religious groups would disagree with."

Portland mayor James Cloutier said councilors wanted to encourage expanded health care benefits while combating discrimination. "This is, in fact, discrimination," Cloutier said. "It's not the worst case of discrimination that ever existed, because it's subtle and it's a little bit indirect, but it's discrimination nonetheless."

Two PA Universities Offer DP Benefits

Philadelphia – Temple and Drexel Universities have decided to provide domestic partnership benefits to their lesbian and gay employees, according to a press release from the ACLU, which urged other employers to follow their leadership.

"Thanks to Temple and Drexel Universities, this [is] truly a happy Valentine's Day for many same sex couples," said Larry Frankel, Legislative Director of the ACLU of Pennsylvania. "The ACLU expects that business and community leaders as well as fair-minded legislators and Governor Rendell will support these schools for doing the right thing."

In Pennsylvania, the ACLU has been extensively involved in efforts to obtain domestic partnership benefits for lesbians and gay men. The ACLU is also battling the University of Pittsburgh in an ongoing lawsuit aimed at securing domestic partnership benefits for that school's employees.

More than a hundred colleges and universities across the country recognize that in order to attract top professors and remain competitive in the academic world, they must treat all employees equally, said an ACLU spokesman.

Cincinnati Passes Hate Crimes Bill

Cincinnati, OH – The City Council expanded the city's hate-crimes law last month to include crimes based on gender, age, physical or mental disability and sexual orientation, despite a city charter amendment making it illegal to enact or enforce laws based on sexual orientation, the Associated Press reported.

The law had already covered race, color, religion and national origin.

The amendment was approved 7-2. "Citizens for Community Values" (CCV) has threat-

ened to sue the city, claiming that the expanded Hate Crimes Ordinance violates Article 12 of the City Charter, which was passed by voters as Issue 3 in 1993 and became law in 1998. Article 12 prohibits the City Council from passing any law giving "minority or protected status" to gay, lesbian, and bisexual citizens.

However, a Feb. 4 opinion by the City Solicitor, J. Rita McNeil, said the proposed ordinance "would not violate the Charter as amended by Article 12."

Stonewall Cincinnati reports that CCV has lost the last four lawsuits the organization filed over similar issues.

Happy 30th to NGLTF

New York – The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force is throwing itself a birthday party as it turns 30 this year – and you too can attend as long as you've got at least \$150 for a ticket. That's where general admission prices start (although current members, students and seniors can get in for a mere \$100).

But if you're a little more flush, definitely go for the VIP ticket at \$250. For that you get admission to a private VIP reception an hour before the general admission folks arrive for a party and auction, plus a gift bag. Ticket price/support options go up from there, all the way to \$5,000 platinum.

The party's at a club called "Pressure" upstairs over the Bowlor Lanes.

Happy Birthday NGLTF. We know you'll spread some of that birthday loot around to help all of our community.

HRC Urges Opposition to Anti-Gay Nominees

Washington – The Human Rights Campaign urged the Senate to oppose a slate of anti-gay judges, nominated by the Bush administration, whose confirmations could place courts outside the mainstream and make it increasingly difficult for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Americans to achieve basic justice and equality through the federal courts.

"We are alarmed that the administration has put forth a slew of unacceptable nominees whose extreme anti-gay views threaten to make the federal courts hostile to basic equality for GLBT Americans," said HRC Executive Director Elizabeth Birch. "We urge the Senate to oppose these nominees."

Among those nominees is Assistant Attorney General Jay Bybee to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 9th Circuit. Bybee characterized sexual orientation-inclusive civil rights laws as nothing more than government-sponsored "preferences" for "homosexuals."

Also opposed is Jeffrey Sutton to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 6th Circuit. Sutton has been a leader in the effort to limit congressional authority to enact laws protecting civil and disability rights, including hate crimes legislation.

Additionally, HRC opposes the nomination of Timothy Tymkovich for Court of Appeals for the 10th Circuit. As solicitor general, Tymkovich defended Colorado's Amendment 2 in a coauthored law

review article, in which he lumped homosexuality with a litany of "immoral" and dangerous behaviors, including sadomasochism, cockfighting, bestiality, suicide, drug use and prostitution.

HRC has also opposed the nomination of Mississippi Judge Charles Pickering to the 5th Circuit Court of Appeals because his career has been punctuated by racial divisiveness and anti-gay sentiments. Last year, HRC opposed the nomination of Michael McConnell to the 10th Circuit Court of Appeals. McConnell, who was confirmed by the Senate in November 2002, contributed to the anti-gay brief for the Boy Scouts in the *Boy Scouts of America v. Dale*.

ConocoPhillips Reinstates Anti-Bias Policy

Dallas, TX – ConocoPhillips, the third largest oil and gas company in the United States, has reversed an earlier decision and has now agreed to implement a written non-discrimination policy that includes protection for its gay and lesbian employees.

In early February the Human Rights Campaign announced that the 2002 merger between Phillips Petroleum and Conoco resulted in the abandonment of Conoco's written anti-bias policy.

Protests by the HRC and other gay civil rights groups, coupled with the threat of a shareholder challenge by gay-friendly stockholders, apparently convinced the company to reinstate the workplace guarantees.

"ConocoPhillips is and always has been deeply committed to fair and nondiscriminatory treatment for all employees," said a company spokesman.

The move leaves Exxon Mobil Corp. as the only American company to ever rescind an established sexual orientation non-discrimination policy. ExxonMobil recalled Mobil's anti-bias policy in December 1999 when the companies merged and also closed Mobil's DP benefits program to new employees.

Frank Confronts BU Chancellor

Boston – Congressman Barney Frank went public with pointed criticism of Boston University Chancellor John Silber and the September closure of the BU Academy Gay-Straight Alliance, according to an article on Datalounge.

Congressman Frank published two letters challenging the chancellor's decision to put financial pressure on Academy (a BU-sponsored high school) officials to close the school's gay student support group and criticizing statements Silber made in defense of that action.

BU spokesman Kevin Carleton said Silber felt Frank's second letter did not warrant a response. In addition to the GSA closing, Frank was angered by Silber's assertion that organizations had a right to discriminate against sexual orientation and other innate characteristics. He also took particular exception to Silber's assertion that openly gay people were "rubbing your nose" in their sexuality.

Frank also condemned Silber's contention that gay people were not naturally attracted to the same sex but were "first seduced into sex," by peers or elders in some

implied form of ritual abuse.

Frank said he felt "some obligation," as an elected official who is gay, "to counteract what I find to be openly anti-gay rhetoric."

Colorado Kills Civil Union Bill

Denver – A House panel voted decisively on Wednesday to indefinitely postpone consideration of a long-shot civil unions bill that would have brought Vermont-style marriage equality to the Rocky Mountain state, reports DataLounge.

As proposed, the same-sex civil union bill would extend legal rights and protections to gay and lesbian families in parenting, insurance, inheritance and finances.

Frank Accosta, president of the local chapter of Parents, Friends and Family of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) declared, "They think if they keep postponing it, it will go away. It won't. It's not a matter of marriage or mocking an institution; it's a matter of civil justice."

The panel voted 8-3 against the measure, with two Democrats joining six Republicans in voting against the bill.

Donations Down for Focus on Family

Colorado Springs – One of the country's most active and politically influential anti-gay evangelical Christian organizations – Focus on the Family – has announced budget cuts and layoffs in the first such reorganization in its history.

According to the Gay Financial Network, the group has cut \$5 million from its budget and laid off 34 employees. As a cost-saving measure, another 66 vacant positions will be eliminated from the 1,300-member workforce, said a spokesman.

Focus on the Family president James Dobson is one of the most outspoken anti-gay activists in the country. With a \$130 million annual budget, Focus on the Family airs 14 radio and television programs in more than 100 countries and publishes more than a dozen evangelical publications.

The economic downturn has hit the organization's interests hard. GFN reports donations, which are the basis of its operating budget, have fallen 3 percent since 1999.

Gay Satellite TV to Launch in April

Aberdeen, WA – GayNewsUSA, a website and film production company, announced in a press release that it will launch a gay satellite television channel under its new name, Avant-Garde TV.

Avant-Garde TV will go on the air April 20, 2003. It will feature 5 channels to start with these general categories: an all-gay-and-lesbian news channel; an adult gay station; an adult European station, available 24 hours, seven days a week, a shopping channel for the GLBT community; and gay and straight adult pay-for-view station which is hooked into 40,000 truck stops in the United States.

The company's studios are in St Paul, Pittsburgh, and at the home office in Seattle.

CIPA = Bookburning Says Expert

San Francisco – The Online Policy

Group (OPG) and software expert Seth Finkelstein have submitted a brief to the U.S. Supreme Court supporting a lower court decision that the Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA) places unconstitutional limitations on free speech of library patrons by requiring the use of technology protection measures in libraries receiving certain federal funding or discounts.

OPG and Finkelstein's brief argues that CIPA's technology protection requirement forces libraries to use commercial blocking software.

Because blocking software censors speech that receives full First Amendment protection and may discriminate against certain viewpoints, OPG and Finkelstein argue that CIPA should be subject to strict scrutiny.

"Especially for 'controversial' topics – such as politics, medical health, child abuse, abortion, sexual orientation, and gender identity – the biases inherent in Internet blocking software are unacceptable," OPG Executive Director Will Doherty said.

"Censorware is not filtering, it is electronic book-burning," commented Seth Finkelstein. "It's a pre-slipped slope denying any privacy, since all reading must be monitored."

The amicus brief from OPG and Finkelstein accompanies the main legal argument from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and other plaintiffs in the U.S. government's appeal from a decision of a special three-judge panel striking down the library portion of CIPA on May 31, 2002.

AP Diversity Slogan Backfires

New York – The *Washington Blade* reported that an Associated Press staff morale gimmick backfired by encouraging employees to call for domestic partner benefits for same-gender partners of employees. During negotiations over wages and benefits with the News Media Guild, the union representing 1700 journalists at AP, the company sent out keychains to employees reading, "AP Diversity: Many Voices, One Vision."

Two of the issues being pushed by the union are AP's refusal to offer domestic partner benefits and to include sexual orientation in its nondiscrimination policy.

Hundreds of AP staff members spontaneously returned the keychains. Among the letters of protest against the company's hypocritical sloganeering, accompanying the returned keychains, the *Blade* quoted two. "As long as AP's policy remains all chain and no key," read one from 66 staffers in Washington DC and other AP outlets, "those doors remain closed."

The second letter said that AP "is losing good people to competing news organizations that do offer domestic partnership coverage." It was "signed by every AP employee in the Montpelier, VT, bureau," said the *Blade's* article. According to Montpelier AP staffer Ross Sneyd, there are eight staffers at the Montpelier bureau. ▼