

OUT in the mountains

VERMONT'S VOICE FOR THE LESBIAN, GAY,
BISEXUAL & TRANSGENDER COMMUNITY SINCE 1985

Moving Marriage *forward*»

Party Politics

BURLINGTON - The R.U.1.2? Queer Community Center was packed with people on a recent February evening to hear proponents of the Marriage Equality bill talk up their proposal. The house party event is a staple of organizers who won the bid for equal marriage in Massachusetts and now is being used for the same purpose in Vermont. This particular party was just one in a series of gatherings around the state to get people signed up to work on the issue.

Organizers chatted with the crowd which filled the rooms of R.U.1.2? and then answered one of the questions they most frequently hear: "Why now?"

"The world has changed dramatically



Rep. David Zuckerman spoke at R.U.1.2? in February in favor of marriage equality.

since 2000," said Beth Robinson, chair of the Vermont Freedom to Marry Task Force. Robinson was referring to the year in which the civil union law was passed, when about 40 percent of Vermonters supported the right of same-sex couples to marry. Now, polls show 43% in favor and 11% leaning toward marriage equity. Also, gay and lesbian couples may marry in Massachusetts to the south of us, and in Canada to the north. At the same time, however, 35 states have passed laws de-

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MONTPELIER - Nearly a decade after three same-sex couples sued the state of Vermont for the right to marry, and six years after the state handed down the civil union compromise, equal rights advocates have placed a marriage proposal on the table. Last month, Burlington Rep. Mark Larson introduced H742, which if passed, will remove gender discrimination from the state's marriage law. Advocates do not expect the amendment, named "An Act to Protect Religious Freedom and Eliminate Discrimination in Marriage," to go far during

the remainder of the legislative session.

"We're not actively pushing for hearings on the marriage bill," said Beth Robinson, chair of the Vermont Freedom to Marry Task Force (VFMTF). "We're just starting the process." The bill, which would adjust Ver-

mont's marriage law to be gender neutral, also makes it clear that no clergy would be required to sanction any same-sex marriage.

"We really are saying churches are free to do as they choose to do," said Robinson, who was one of two attorneys who filed Baker v. State in 1998, the case that eventually led to the civil union law of 2000. Robinson said the current proposal is not a change in position, but rather an attempt to be clearer up front that clergy would not be required to sanction any marriage she or he disapproves of.

VFMTF recently commissioned a poll of 401 Vermonters on the issue of marriage equality, Robinson said. In that poll, conducted by ORC Macro which has offices in Burlington, a majority of the 401 people polled either favored equality in marriage, or leaned that way. "I was not surprised, but I was heartened" by the results, Robinson said. She said the poll confirmed what she has felt in recent years that "people are with us" and ensures that it's "safer politically" now to put this issue before the legislature. The results contrast with a November 2004 poll showing 40 percent of Vermont-



Beth Robinson and Robyn Maguire (right) talk up equal marriage at the R.U.1.2? house party.

ers supporting marriage.

The Vermont initiative takes place among a mix of measures in other states both for marriage equality and against it. In Maryland recently, a judge struck down a law denying equal marriage to same-sex couples. The state of Virginia will be considering an anti-marriage amendment this year, as will several other states. Last year, the California legislature passed an equal marriage bill, but that was vetoed by Gov. Schwarzenegger. Currently only the state of Massachusetts allows same-sex couples to legally marry.

On the national scene, a newly organized coalition of groups called Marriage Equality Matters will work to support the right to marry. During Freedom to Marry Week in February, the five groups announced

they had joined forces to end discrimination in marriage, and in particular to bring the discussion to a higher level within communities of color. Lambda Legal, National Black Justice Coalition, Asian Equality, National Latina/o Coalition for Justice, and Freedom to Marry joined hands to form the coalition.

It was a timely move, given that a majority of states within the U.S. have already written marriage discrimination into their laws, or constitutions, or both. In addition to states' efforts to discriminate, Republican members of the U.S. Senate have announced their bid for a Constitutional amendment banning equal marriage rights for the third year in a row.

Sen. Rick Santorum of

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VERMONT FREEDOM TO MARRY TASK FORCE: To volunteer or for more information about marriage equality in Vermont go to www.vtfreetomarry.org, email Robyn Maguire at field_director@vtfreetomarry.org or call 802.388.2633.