

quest editorial

Silence = Unfriendly Majority

BY REP. BILL LIPPERT

Beware, GLBT Vermonters! Do not take for granted our community's significant progress and the positive GLBT atmosphere in the Green Mountain State. Look east to Falmouth, Maine, to see what our GLBT sisters and brothers and their allies are facing there. Then see the dangers that lie just below the surface right here in Vermont.

On Election Day, 1999, Falmouth, ME, residents vote on an amendment to the town charter. If passed, it would nullify a recent anti-bias law and prevent any future "ordinance, policy, or regulation regarding sexual orientation."

According to *in newsworthy*, Maine's Christian Coalition is gearing up to underwrite and

lesbian rights – much less the more controversial idea of same-sex marriage – is already teetering on the brink in the Vermont House of Representatives.

In 1997-98, the 150-member House had an 89-member Democratic majority, 57 Republicans, 3 Progressives, and one independent. Election 1998 reduced the Democratic "majority" to 77 seats, increased Republican seats to 66 and elected 4 Progressives, 2 independents and a Libertarian. The actual "gay-positive" majority is harder to calculate; some conservative Democrats do not support our legislation, while a few liberal and moderate Republicans would.

It's clear to legislators committed to the GLBT community that the House has become

and conservative Democrats. "It's democracy in action!" they opined. "It is just giving everyone a chance to express themselves."

I testified against the bill in the House Local Government Committee, spoke against it in the House Democratic caucus, and led a public debate against it on Peter Freyne's cable television show. The Citizen's Initiative bill did not pass out of committee nor become law. Not then, anyway. But it is back, tweaked and reintroduced for another try.

Vermont's GLBT community needs to realize that the state House of Representatives is but a few more lost local elections away from again being controlled by our opponents. We cannot afford to let that happen – I have seen what our opponents would like to thrust upon us.

Regardless of what our Supreme Court decides on same-sex marriage, the Vermont legislature will become the focus of intense pressure for defending gay and lesbian people. We either face fighting an anti-gay marriage Vermont constitutional amendment or fighting out the issue in legislative committees and on the House floor.

Opponents have promised to pour enough money into Vermont "to do whatever it takes" to ensure a favorable court decision does not stand. Win or lose with the Supreme Court, we must also prepare for subsequent ongoing legislative battles that will ultimately determine our GLBT community's long-term future.

We must begin organizing now to support GLBT-positive local legislative candidates for election and re-election in the fall of 2000. We must contribute money early to supporters, plan to help in their campaigns, or decide to run ourselves.

Two weeks from now, Falmouth voters make a decision in the face of anti-gay propaganda. One year from now, in November, 2000, Vermonters' will make decisions. Over the next 12 months, I plan to work hard to sustain a gay-friendly legislative majority in the Vermont Statehouse. I welcome you to join me!

Bill Lippert represents Hinesburg in the Vermont House of Representatives. He is Vice Chair of the House Judiciary Committee and Chair of the Legislative Committee on Administrative Rules. Reach him at 482-3528, 2751 Baldwin Rd, Hinesburg 05461, or BillLipper@aol.com ▼

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distribute to every Falmouth resident printed anti-gay propaganda called "The Gay Agenda." Last year's first edition was sent by the Coalition to all residents of South Portland, Maine, where it had targeted another anti-bias law effort. "The Gay Agenda" spouted numerous "facts:" that gay men have a propensity to ingest feces, that gay men may have smaller brains, and that, on average, gay men have had over 550 sexual partners. Coalition leader Paul Volle says the new issue for Falmouth will be "honest and factual" like the first, but with new content.

Worse, this propaganda can be funded anonymously. In a recent federal court victory challenging Maine's campaign disclosure requirements, Maine's Christian Coalition won the right to contributor secrecy. It's now legal there to donate anonymously when influencing "initiative referenda." This opens the door further for out-of-state anti-gay money to influence this "local" issue.

(As Vermonters, think "same-sex marriage." Think "referendum." Think of the Vermont media swamped by a tidal wave of out-of-state anti-gay money and propaganda.)

Why should Vermonters worry about what is happening in Falmouth, Maine? Why do I believe that similar dangers for the Vermont community lie just below the surface?

I say "just below the surface" because majority control by legislators who support gay and

more conservative and less friendly to constituencies such as ours. It saddens and infuriates me, but I am not confident that, given the current makeup of the Vermont House of Representatives, we would have the commitment and votes to pass our existing sexual orientation civil rights bill if it were put to a vote this session.

To maintain hard-gained ground, GLBT Vermonters must take local Vermont legislative politics more seriously than ever in the next few years!

Depending on your perspective, the November, 2000, election is "only one year away" or "a whole year away." As the only openly gay member of the Vermont General Assembly, let me assure you, we must start thinking *now* about supporting gay-friendly candidates for the 2000 House elections!

I have spent the last six years in the Vermont House, and have seen legislative proposals that could have meant our own versions of Falmouth. I have seen strong, gay-friendly House Democratic majorities – which brought Vermont gay civil rights, hate crimes legislation, and protection for reappointment of judges – start to slip away, election by election, seat by lost seat. I have seen staunch GLBT allies defeated by tremendous fundraising by Republican opponents.

Two years ago, I alerted legislative colleagues to the dangers of a benign-looking "Citizen's Initiative" bill touted by a coalition of Republicans

Elizabeth Campbell

CERTIFIED PUBLIC ACCOUNTANT

15 E. Washington St., Rutland, VT 05701
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