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VERMONT'S FORUM FOR LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, AND TRANSGENDER ISSUES

OUT IN THE MOUNTAINS

Volume XV, Number 1

February 2000

www.mountainpridemedia.org

Proposals Seek Popular Input

Opponents of same-gender marriage are having mixed results as they pursue several measures to poll the population on the issue, some of which would shift decision-making power away from the state legislature.

Town meeting balloting proposals are meeting with some success, while pushes for a citizens' initiative and a constitutional amendment that would limit marriage to opposite-gender couples have not yet made much headway.

Two Rutland county lawmakers have sent a letter asking selectboards of every town in the state to add two non-binding questions on their respective ballots for March 7.

Senator John Bloomer of Rutland and Representative Robert Helm of Castleton want voters to answer questions on whether they agree with legalized same-gender marriage and whether the state should create a substantially equal domestic partnership system.

"Many people cannot, or will not, come to Montpelier to testify publicly, even on issues such as these that concern everyone in our state," their letter read in part. "[W]e feel that each and every Vermonter deserves the right to voice their opinion."

"I think the people out there want us to hear from them," Helm told the *Rutland Herald*.

Rutland City and Town boards were receptive to the idea of including the question on town ballots, the *Herald* reported on January 21.

Rockingham has already drafted a ballot item that, if passed, would ask the legislature to put the marriage issue up for a statewide referendum.

Virginia Renfrew of the Vermont Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Rights said this is a dangerous move. "When you go after the majority's voice this way, you don't get the majority's voice," she said. Renfrew said town meeting

Committees Hold Hearing on Baker Decision

Crowd braves weather to be heard at packed Statehouse

BY BARBARA DOZETOS

Despite a snowstorm that ravaged the northeast, more than a thousand Vermonters showed up at the Statehouse on January 25 to attend a public hearing held by the House and Senate Judiciary committees.

The question: How should the legislature to the Supreme Court decision in *Baker v Vermont*?

Although the majority of early speakers devoted their allotted two minutes to advocating same-sex marriage, their opposition was more vocal in the latter part of the evening.

Some proponents of same-sex marriage told lawmakers that marriage has been redefined many times to correct historical inequalities.

Others stuck to character testimonials of their own or others' gay and lesbian families.

At least two speakers publicly outed themselves, describing the stress of living lives in secrecy and inequality.

Opponents of same-gender marriage relied heavily on scriptural interpretations. Many took the "love the sinner, hate the sin" approach.

"Marriage was defined by God Almighty, not human beings," said Martha Foster of Jericho. "Though I wish I had the liberty to say they can marry, I don't have that right."

Others condemned homosexuality itself. One speaker used lengths of pipe to demonstrate the physical impossibility of same-sex union.

Many felt the Court had overstepped its jurisdiction in the *Baker* ruling and called for referenda and constitutional amendments to allow only heterosexual marriage.

Only a handful of witnesses on either side advocated a parallel system to marriage, and many spoke against it.

"Here's a litmus test to tell you when you've created an equal system," said Donna Lescoe of Starksboro. "When everyone in this room is comfortable trading in their mar-



Photo: Jordan Silverman

House and Senate Judiciary committees listened for more than four hours on Jan. 25. About 100 Vermonters expressed opinions on meeting the Supreme Court's mandate in the Dec. 20 *Baker* decision.

riage license for whatever the new system is, then you've got it."

"The one thing that became clear tonight," said Senator Dick McCormack of Bethel, "is that domestic partnership may not be the easy compromise originally thought."

But if there was no consensus, there was also no lack of civility. Although almost two dozen state and local police

and security personnel were on hand, the crowd largely remained polite and calm.

"I am extremely proud of our community," said Representative Bill Lippert, the openly gay vice-chair of the House Judiciary Committee. "We handled ourselves wonderfully on an important night." ▼

HIV/AIDS Funding Rules Restrictions in Question

BY BARBARA DOZETOS

Vermont organizations that provide services to people with HIV and AIDS are in disagreement over how the Department of Health can best fund such work.

On January 20, one group of consumers asked the House Appropriations Committee to add restrictions to the budget so that only existing AIDS services organizations and peer-run AIDS organizations could receive state funding.

"Our [proposed] changes direct the funds to pay for existing programs, rather than try to fund a range of separate programs in organizations that don't deal primarily with HIV/AIDS," said John Hannah, who made the proposal on behalf of the newly formed HIV+ Public Policy Project of Vermont CARES.

The original budget, passed last May, made a broader stipulation: that DoH funds could be

allocated to any AIDS organizations with 75 percent or more of their programs in HIV/AIDS services or prevention.

But other Vermont organizations think that even the original plan was too restrictive. Rob Larabee, the statewide consumer organizer for the Vermont People with AIDS Coalition, thinks that making the money available to other organizations would be a positive move.

"We have to find ways to get to the people who are hiding from us," said Larabee. He said that the highest rates of HIV infections now are among intravenous drug users, who often don't want to be seen walking into an ASO. "People who are still using don't want to be identified," he said.

Some ASOs themselves also believe that competition should be free, even if that meant a smaller share of funding for their own organizations.

"I think it's healthier that any group has an opportunity write up a proposal to get part of those monies," said Tom Moch, co-executive director of AIDS Community Resource Network in White River Junction.

"If we can't stand that competition, we're in the wrong business," said Susan Bell, Brattleboro Area AIDS Project director. She said her organization's mission is to make the HIV-positive community and those at risk of becoming infected are served. "In the most rural areas, another organization might be better suited [for the work.]" Bell said.

Hannah disagrees. "This is not the time to make a healthier market through diversity," he said. While allowing community doctors and clinics to provide services sounds like a cost-effective way to use funds, he contends it's not necessarily best for the consumer.

"The experience of AIDS is

not something every doctor can understand. Stigmatization is very high and a very high degree of specialization is required," said Hannah.

Virginia Renfrew, a lobbyist formerly contracted by the VPWAC, now working for the HIV+ Public Policy Project, also cautions against what may be a move to mainstream HIV care and treatment. "I predict that if the funding gets opened up, the ASOs will be gone within two years," she said.

"If that's what the people with HIV/AIDS truly want, then so be it. But they should certainly be aware of what's going on," said Renfrew.

The House Appropriations Committee is expected to finalize the changes to the budget before Town Meeting Day.

The various AIDS/HIV organizations plan to address their philosophical differences with a meeting in the near future. ▼