

news

Marriage Issue Takes Center Stage at the Statehouse

BY BARBARA DOZETOS

On January 4, the first day of the 2000 legislative session, state representatives on the House Judiciary Committee met to discuss how to comply with the recent Vermont Supreme Court decision.

A domestic partnership bill sponsored by Senator Vincent Illuzzi of Orleans was introduced later that week, but will likely receive little play. The leadership of the General Assembly has agreed to let the House bear primary responsibility for conducting hearings and research, taking testimony, and drafting a bill for consideration initial consideration.

The House Judiciary Committee led off in this process.

"In view of the intense feelings and concerns that will be raised by and in our work on *Baker v. State*," said committee chairman Tom Little, "my goal is to not only keep the Committee's 'eye' on the Constitutional principles, but also to build consensus and avoid divisiveness within the General Assembly and throughout the state."

In accordance with the Court's instruction to deal with the inequality "in a timely fashion," Little produced an "ambitious proposal" to have a bill ready to present to the full House by February 23. Committee member Bill Mackinnon agreed with the need to expedite the bill. "If Vermonters' civil rights are hanging in the breeze, we shouldn't leave here this spring until we've taken care of it," said Mackinnon.

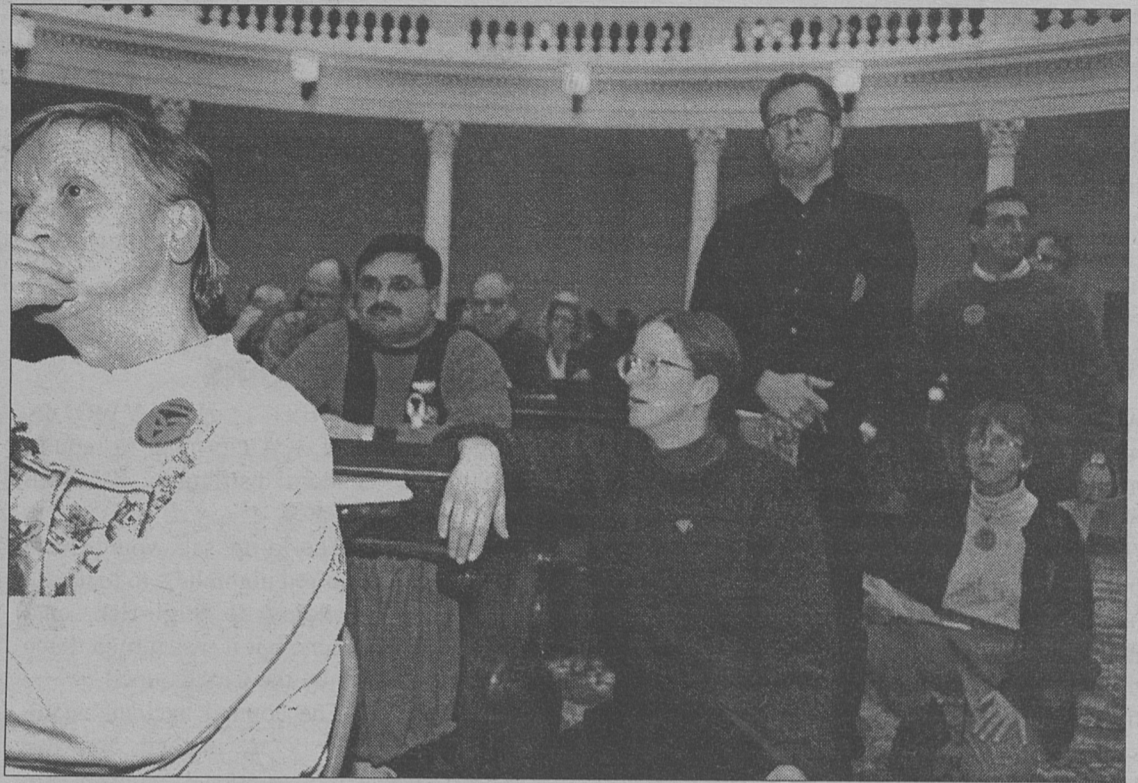
Testimony before the committee began on January 11

with Susan Murray and Beth Robinson, attorneys for the plaintiffs in the Supreme Court case. The two stressed that the issue before the legislature is civil, not religious, marriage and that an alternative system of benefits seemingly parallel to marriage would not pass Constitutional muster. Several others, including law professors from Vermont Law School, have offered corroborating testimony.

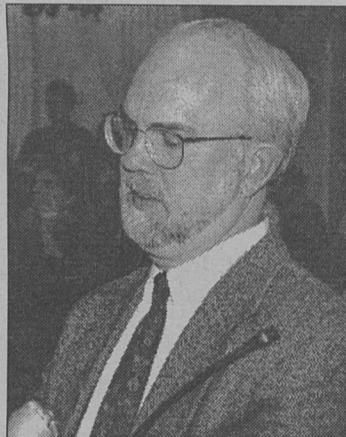
Other witnesses have included representatives from the Attorney General's office, whose job it will be to defend whatever legislation is produced on this issue. Although they offered no opinion on what action should be taken, Chief Assistant Attorney General Bill Griffin did say that he believes the marriage option would be much easier to defend legally.

Representatives of the Catholic Diocese of Vermont, the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter Day Saints, and Take it to the People encouraged the committee to consider a range of options, including ignoring the Court's ruling completely and beginning the process of amending the state's constitution.

Representative Bill Lippert of Hinesburg, the openly gay vice-chair of the committee, said he has "tried to find a balance between confronting and exposing witnesses who are clearly motivated by religious prejudice or positions of



Vermonters hoping to testify on the issue of gay marriage lined up to offer their two-minutes' worth at the public hearing on January 25



Rep. Bill Lippert of Hinesburg is the Vice-Chair of the committee currently dealing with the marriage issue.

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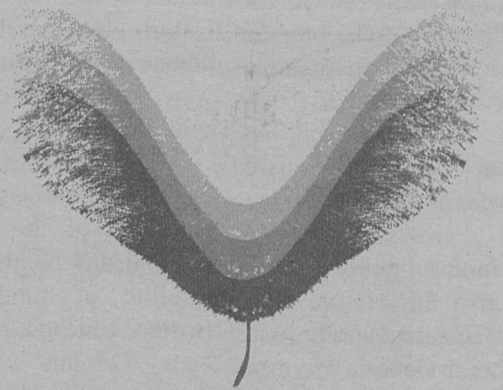
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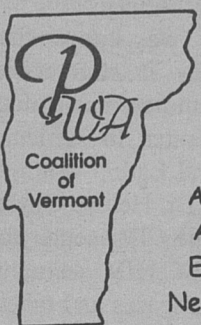
- Letters of intent due March 1
- Final grant proposals due May 5
- Grant awards announced in June

Our Mission

The Samara Foundation of Vermont is a charitable foundation whose mission is to support and strengthen Vermont's gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered communities today and build an endowment for tomorrow.

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