

Oregon House approves historic equality bills

by Bend_Weekly_News_Sources

Gay Oregonians gain protection from discrimination, access to domestic partnerships

SALEM—In a historic vote, the Oregon House of Representatives gave bipartisan approval to two bills that will extend greater equality to gay and lesbian Oregonians.

“Freedom from discrimination enables people to learn, work, contribute, and achieve,” said State Representative David Edwards (D-Hillsboro) during the floor debate. “To be deprived of it is a kind of excommunication from society and its rewards. When it comes to basic rights, everyone should count with the same weight. For me this principle embodied in this legislation is derived equally from the code of heaven and from our country’s founding documents. And for our fellow Oregonians, it means a fair chance to make the most of their lives.”

Senate Bill 2 will prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation in housing, employment, public accommodation, education and public services. The bill contains a broad religious exemption that prevents churches and other religious institutions or organizations from complying with the law if doing so would compromise the tenets of their faith.

“Today, some will present this vote as a choice between people of faith and people of differing sexual orientations,” said House Majority Leader Dave Hunt (D-Clackamas County). “I believe that is a false choice. The truth is today we cast a vote for fairness based on sexual orientation and freedom of religion. These are not mutually exclusive concepts. The expansion of freedom and fairness does not threaten those principles, but strengthens their value and meaning in our culture.”

House Bill 2007 will create domestic partnerships that provide same-sex couples with protections and benefits similar to those available through a marriage contract. More than 500 such protections are available under Oregon law. The domestic partnership law is different from marriage—it is an entirely separate body of law, does not require a solemnization ceremony as marriage does, will not extend outside the borders of the state of Oregon and will not extend to same-sex couples the more than 1,200 benefits provided to married couples through federal law.

“In the most fundamental human ways, the legal recognition of our relationship really matters,” said State Representative Tina Kotek (D-N/NE Portland), as she made the case for the bill with her partner Aimee by her side. “We’re no different than other couples in many ways. We love each other in good times, and we support each other in hard times. By passing House Bill 2007 and instituting comprehensive, legally-recognized domestic partnerships for same-sex couples, you will provide security, comfort and peace of mind to my family, as well as to families just like mine in every community in Oregon.”

“There are people in our communities who need a piece of legislation to be able to be in the room as their spouse draws their last breath,” said Speaker Pro Tempore Diane Rosenbaum (D-Portland) who made the case for both bills on the House floor. “There are people in our communities who need a piece of legislation to have the right to see their children. These are people who need us, today, to demonstrate the moral courage to recognize that they and their families count.”

The effort to enact this legislation has taken place over the course of 34 years, when the first anti-discrimination bill was introduced. During the 2005 legislative session, an omnibus bill that would have created civil unions and a statewide anti-discrimination law, passed the Senate. Despite bipartisan support for the bill in the House, House Republican Leadership changed more than 140 years of legislative rule to block the bill from coming to a vote.

House Bill 2007 now moves to the Senate for consideration. Senate Bill 2 will return to the Senate for a concurrence vote before being signed by the Governor.

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