



Legislature Kills Gay Marriage Amendment

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BOSTON (FOX25, myfoxboston.com) -- Massachusetts lawmakers on Thursday blocked a proposed constitutional amendment banning gay marriage from reaching voters, a stunning victory for gay marriage advocates and a devastating blow to efforts to reverse a historic 2003 court ruling legalizing same-sex marriage.

The 45-151 vote means Massachusetts remains the only state in the nation to allow same-sex couples to marry. The question needed the approval of 50 of 200 lawmakers in consecutive sessions to advance to the 2008 ballot. It got the first approval at the end of last session in January with 62 votes.

As the tally was announced, the halls of the Statehouse erupted in cheers and applause from supporters of gay marriage gathered outside the House chambers.

"We're proud of our state today, and we applaud the Legislature for showing that Massachusetts is strongly behind fairness," said Lee Swislow, executive director of Gay & Lesbian Advocates & Defenders.

"Equality for gay and lesbian citizens has enriched our state, made our communities stronger, and our families happier," Swislow said. "The vote today was the triumph of time, experience, and understanding over fear and prejudice."

Gov. Deval Patrick, who worked until the final hours lobbying lawmakers to kill the question, applauded the vote.

"In Massachusetts today, the freedom to marry is secure," he said.

In contrast to several past joint sessions, there was no debate Thursday: Senate President Therese Murray opened the constitutional convention vote on the same sex marriage ban.

More than 8,500 same sex couples have married in Massachusetts since they became legal in May 2004.

"Today's vote averts a divisive, defamatory and hugely expensive campaign that our national community would have had to wage between now and 2008 to preserve the freedom to marry in the one state where we have it," said Matt Foreman, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.

The vote is also a victory for the state's Democratic leadership, including Patrick, a vocal supporter of gay marriage, who pressed lawmakers up until the final moments to block the measure.

House Speaker Salvatore DiMasi, D-Boston and Murray, D-Plymouth, also support gay marriage and worked to change votes -- arguing the rights of a minority group should not be put to a popular vote.

In the end, they changed more minds than needed, with the measure falling five votes short of passing.

Leading up to the joint legislative session, there were indications that supporters of gay marriage were gaining ground. A handful of lawmakers who had voted in favor of the amendment in the past said they were reconsidering their vote.

And one lawmaker who had voted in favor of the amendment -- Rep. Anthony Verga, D-Gloucester -- was unable to attend the joint session after falling and injuring himself Wednesday.

Outside the Statehouse, hours before the vote, hundreds rallied on both sides of the issue.

"We believe it's unconstitutional not to allow people to vote on this," said Rebekah Beliveau, 24, of Lawrence, a student at Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary who stood with fellow college-age amendment supporters across the street from the Statehouse.

"We're standing up not necessarily on the issue of same-sex marriage, but our right to vote," Beliveau said. Advocates of the amendment said they gathered 170,000 signatures supporting the amendment, although the secretary of state's office accepted only 123,000.

Across the road, gay marriage advocates stood on the front steps of the capital waving signs that read, "Wrong to Vote on Rights" and "All Families Are Equal."

Jean Chandler, 62, of Cambridge, came with fellow members of her Baptist church in an effort to rebuff the image that strict followers of the Bible are opposed to gay marriage.

"I think being gay is like being left-handed," Chandler said. "If we decided left-handed people couldn't marry, what kind of society would we be?"