



Far Right Claims 1.1 Million Signatures to Put Anti-Gay Marriage Amendment on Ballot

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Homophobic groups claimed on April 21 that they had gathered more than enough signatures to place on the November ballot a vote to make a California Constitutional amendment defining marriage as between one man and one woman. The result of a yes vote would thus officially place discrimination against marriage equality and same-sex marriage in the state constitution. A coalition of “religious” groups known as Protect Marriage allegedly has collected more than 1.1 million signatures in support of this, according to Brian Brown, Executive Director of the California Office of the National Organization for Marriage. The initiative only requires approximately 700,000 signatures or 8 percent of the votes cast in the last Governor’s race, to put it to public vote. Brown has claimed this is the chance for voters to protect marriage.

Supporters of this initiative have said they intend to turn in their signed petitions to county registrars this week, ahead of the April 28 submission deadline set by the Office of the California Secretary of State. However, all signatures must be verified before the amendment can be approved for election.

Even though queers cannot legally wed in California - thanks to a reversal and voiding of thousands of lesbian/gay marriage certificates during the Winter of Love in San Francisco four years ago - opponents of queer marriage intend to write the ban right into the California Constitution. This way neither the California Supreme Court nor the Legislature could legalize same-sex unions without voter approval. Equality activists are calling this a mean-spirited act and a disgrace to use the hallowed Constitution for overt discrimination.

Meanwhile the California Supreme Court is scheduled to rule by early June on several lawsuits seeking to modify the State’s policy regarding same-sex marriage.

Brown admitted that Protect Marriage had raised over a million and a half dollars to support its signature drive and thereby hire paid petitioners to get signatures.

As soon as Equality for All, a coalition of marriage equality activists, learned of this – and the alleged trickery used to get voters to sign something they did not fully understand - it launched its “Decline to Sign” campaign to persuade voters not to sign the deceitful petition. For nearly two months, activists stood outside malls and markets, right alongside petitioners for amending, explaining the true meaning of the discriminatory petition, and asking people instead to sign a pledge in support of civil rights for all.

California Assemblyman Mark Leno, who authored two different pro-gay marriage bills that both passed both Houses of State Legislature, spoke to Bay Times. “I truly appreciate the efforts of Equality California and the Equality for All Coalition that led the Decline to Sign campaign,” said

Leno. "They have done an extraordinarily great job." He said there is "not yet certainty that our opponents have indeed gathered enough signatures, nor have they turned them in yet." He noted, "I think this was just a bit of theatre on their part, and we will soon know if in fact they have enough signatures and whether they will qualify."

Leno said, "It is NOT a done deal, and we will have to be patient, but I am confident if they do qualify, we will defeat them." He said, "With marriage equality much more an understood issue among voters in California, and polls showing great numbers of people moving in our direction ... we will defeat this bit of hatred." He added that with Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger's leadership in opposing the ballot measure and the State becoming ever bluer, there is even more hope to squelch this attempt to amend the Constitution. Leno said, "It is quite likely we will have a very positive response from the California Supreme Court within the next month or so, and the Governor has gone on record that he will abide by what the Court decides, which means he could potentially sign our bill."

On April 10, Governor Schwarzenegger had added his voice of opposition to the proposed Constitutional amendment, saying, "Well, first of all, I think it would never happen in California, because I think that California people are much further along on that issue; and number two, I will always be there to fight against that."

"They aren't giving a real number yet - so while yes, I have lost almost all hope, there is still some small glimmer," National Center for Lesbian Rights Executive Director Kate Kendall told Bay Times. "If they actually turn in less than one million, they may not qualify. While they are saying they have 'collected over 1.1 million,' that does not mean that is what they will turn in. If they do their own 'scrubbing' of their list, the number they actually submit will drop." She added wistfully, "A girl's gotta dream..."

But, Kendall noted, "If the worst comes to pass, if their amendment gets on the November ballot, we will fight this with everything we have. Because no matter the disappointment or fatigue, we cannot rest - not yet!"

Kendall warned, "We must prepare now for the long and expensive fight ahead to defeat this amendment in November." She noted that opponents have out-spent equality activists by more than 2 to 1 so far. They raised \$230,000 in just the last 18 days. In total, the opposition has admitted to spending well over \$1.5 million to gather signatures, and there is no doubt they will spend millions more to try to pass the amendment. "We have to close that gap and surpass them in order to win," said Kendall. "Please make as generous a contribution as you can to the Equality For All campaign to match that \$230,000 - and more. Each and every penny will go toward defeating this hateful effort to exclude same-sex couples from marriage in California for generations to come."

She said they have talked to millions of Californians and have built an incredible base of strong support, thanks to people's contributions. She said, "What most campaigns accomplish in six months, we accomplished in six weeks. We have so much to be proud of. And I am sure our proudest moments are actually yet to come."

A spokesperson for NGLTF (the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force) agreed that he had never before witnessed such a well-coordinated effort by opponents to an anti-gay amendment to the Constitution being part of the ballot.

"It appears that extremist out-of-state organizations including Focus on the Family bought their way onto the California ballot in an unconscionable attempt to impose their discriminatory beliefs on Californians," Geoff Kors, Executive Director of Equality California and Executive Committee Member of Equality for All, told Bay Times.

"If our community and our allies do what is needed, we will win in November. We have the Legislature on our side. We have the Governor on our side.

And we believe we will have the voters on our side."

He said, "While it may be more than a month before the signatures are counted and we know for certain whether the initiative qualifies, we can be proud to have put up an extraordinary fight." Kors cautioned, "But to win it will take each of us to do our part. It means volunteering. It means donating. It means speaking to everyone each of us knows about why this is so important to us."

He concluded, "I can guarantee you this: we will do everything in our power to make sure our families have the kind of dignity and respect they deserve - the kind that comes only with marriage." He added, "We have come so far in California in the last decade, and together we can and will achieve true equality and defeat this outrageous assault on our rights."

"We won't know for several weeks if the proponents have actually submitted the signatures they claim or if they have turned in enough to qualify their proposal for the November ballot," Seth Kilbourn, Equality For All Campaign Manager, told Bay Times. "After failing in 2004 and 2006 to qualify similar amendments for the ballot, out-of-state extremist organizations had to spend close to \$2 million and resort to paying people brought in from outside California to collect the signatures they claim to have." He added, "The freedom to marry is a fundamental right like other basic human rights - such as free speech, the right to vote, and the pursuit of happiness. The government has no business telling people who they can or cannot marry."

"Proponents of this amendment resorted to paying people imported from across the country to gather signatures," said Lorri L. Jean, CEO of the L.A. Gay & Lesbian Center and President of the Equality For All Campaign. "The Equality for All Campaign has recruited thousands of California volunteers from all across the State to tell voters the truth about this initiative and the harm it could cause for millions of California families." Jean added, "Californians believe people should not be treated unfairly under the laws of our State."