

# THE Nation.

## LGBT Victory -- With an Emphasis on T -- in Gainesville

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Chris Nichols

"I love this town," Gainesville City Commissioner Craig Lowe shouted to cheering supporters of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights in the north-central Florida city that on Tuesday rejected a proposal to strike down a local anti-discrimination ordinance. "Today we showed what we are really made of. This has been an experience that none of us has asked for, but we have established that in Gainesville every person matters."

Across the United States, members of the LGBT community still find themselves in the absurd and frightening position of having their rights submitted to the electorate for up and down votes. And this phenomenon tends to play out a lot in southern college towns, such as Gainesville.

On these progressive islands in more socially-conservative regions, long-standing LGBT communities often succeed in enacting and expanding upon local anti-discrimination ordinances only to have them challenged at the ballot box.

That's precisely what happened in Gainesville, where Lowe led a push in early 2008 to enact anti-discrimination protections for transgender citizens. Gainesville had barred discrimination against lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals since 1998. But the extension of the gender-identity protection created what national right-wing groups saw as an opening to roll back the entire anti-discrimination ordinance.

Citizens for Good Public Policy, a social conservative group, gathered 6,000 signatures on petitions that forced Tuesday's referendum vote on Amendment 1, a proposal designed to repeal not just the protections for transgender people but also for gays, lesbians and bisexuals.

The referendum campaign was bitter, divisive and, at least on the part of proponents of the amendment, crudely dishonest.

According to the *Gainesville Sun*,

[Citizens for Good Public Policy chair Mark] Minck said throughout the campaign that the goal of the ordinance was not to allow discrimination but rather to keep men out of women's restrooms. Minck and other citizens interpreted the 'gender identity' clause included in Gainesville's anti-discrimination ordinance as a vague definition that would allow men -- even predators -- to enter women's restrooms without an enforceable law.

Amendment supporters used the slogan: "Vote yes on Amendment 1 to keep men out of women's restrooms."

Lowe and his allies countered the lies with the Equality is Gainesville's Business campaign, which organized civil rights, religious and political activists to participate in a campaign that boldly declared: "We refuse to believe the lies and scare tactics, and know that Charter Amendment 1 is really about discrimination."

The campaigners linked their messaging to the Obama campaign, which carried not just Gainesville but Florida last fall. A campaign ad aimed at University of Florida students featured a young man in a blue-and-white "Obama '08" t-shirt declaring: "Students were heard when we elected President Obama, who opposes discrimination. Raise your voice again -- against discrimination!"

Much was made last fall about racial and ethnic divisions over California's same-sex marriage amendment. But in Gainesville, the "Vote No" coalition included the Alachua County NAACP and people of color featured prominently in its campaigning. So, too, did members of the LGBT community, including a local firefighter who explained how she could lose her job if the amendment passed, and public officials who were willing to spend political capital to take a stand against discrimination.

"Although a mid-size city, Gainesville has a small town character that comes from a deep sense of community. We are a community that constantly seeks to improve. We are a city that has developed a reputation of being welcoming, inclusive, and forward thinking," explained Lowe in a pre-election message to voters. "On March 24, we will be asked if we want to erase the progress that has carefully been put in place through the hard work and determination of many."

The response was a resounding "No!"

In a dramatically higher-than-usual turnout election, Gainesville voted by a 58-42 margin to continue to protect the rights of its lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender citizens. That was a big victory for a smart campaign in Gainesville.

**But it had national significance, as well, as the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Action Fund noted in a celebratory reaction to the result. "Voters rejected the right-wing's attempts to make their lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender friends, family and neighbors second-class citizens. While the opposition rooted its campaign in lies and scare tactics, fair-minded Gainesville voters knew that Charter Amendment 1 was really about discrimination," declared Rea Carey, executive director of the action fund, which provided significant financial and tactical support to the Gainesville campaigners. "We congratulate Equality is Gainesville's Business for its hard work to defeat this ugly and hurtful measure, and to ensure that Gainesville remains a welcoming community for all -- including lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people."**