

City Council advances bill targeting pregnancy centers

By George P. Matysek Jr.

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A bill that would impose new requirements on pro-life pregnancy centers in the city took a step closer to becoming law when the Baltimore City Council passed the measure 12-3 in a preliminary vote Nov. 16. Bill 09-0406 now faces a final vote after Thanksgiving and, if approved, will head to Mayor Sheila Dixon.

The controversial measure, which has been criticized by Catholic leaders as a form of harassment against pro-life pregnancy centers, would require centers to post signs if they do not provide abortion or birth control. Failure to do so could result in a \$150 daily fine.

On a 5-10 vote, the council rejected an amendment offered by Councilman James B. Kraft that would have broadened the bill to require abortion clinics to post signs indicating what services they do not provide.

When a woman is facing a decision about abortion, Kraft said, it's important for her to have access to information about all services – including abortion, adoption, birth control, counseling, financial assistance, postnatal assistance and prenatal services.

“Each place should give her every bit of information it can,” Kraft said.

Council President Stephanie Rawlings-Blake, chief sponsor of the bill, voted against Kraft's amendment. Despite the fact that there were no amendments offered that would have required abortion providers to post signs saying that they offer abortions, Rawlings-Blake told the council she opposed making abortion clinics post such signs because it could open them up to violence.

“There's a long history of violence against abortion providers,” she insisted.

Nancy Paltell, associate director for the respect life department of the Maryland

Catholic Conference, called the president's comments "condescending." She noted that women seeking abortion know why they are going to abortion clinics. She also pointed out that the council president failed to note that there has been violence against pro-life supporters.

Paltell, a representative of the state's bishops in Annapolis, said possible passage of the bill is "very problematic."

"I do not understand why the City Council feels obliged to harass, persecute and further regulate charities that are saving lives while they have no desire to regulate abortion clinics in any way, shape or form," she said. "The inequity of it all just boggles the mind."

Rawlings-Blake said she introduced the bill to promote "truth in advertising." Her measure has the strong backing of Planned Parenthood and NARAL Pro-Choice Maryland.

"(The purpose) is to make sure no one is intentionally or unintentionally misled," Rawlings-Blake said.

Paltell said pro-life pregnancy centers already post signs indicating that they do not provide abortion or contraception. The bill is all about targeting and discrediting them and is part of a larger campaign, she said.

The Montgomery County Council is considering a bill that would require pro-life pregnancy resource centers to tell new clients that the information they provide is not intended to be medical advice and to turn to other providers before "proceeding on a course of action regarding [her] pregnancy." The regulation would impose a fine of up to \$750 per day for not doing so.

Pro-life supporters in Baltimore have organized a petition drive to amend the city charter to prohibit the City Council from passing legislation requiring any speech concerning abortion and birth control.

The following City Council members voted in favor of Bill 09-0406: Stephanie Rawlings-Blake, Nicholas D'Adamo Jr., Robert Curran, Bill Henry, Rochelle "Rikki" Spector, Sharon Green Middleton, Belinda Conaway, Helen Holton, Edward

Reisinger, William H. Cole IV, Warren Branch and Mary Pat Clarke.

The following City Council members voted against Bill 09-0406: James B. Kraft, Agnes Welch and Bernard "Jack" Young.