

District of Columbia votes for same-sex marriage; archdiocese continues dialogue

WASHINGTON - The Washington Archdiocese vowed continued dialogue with the District of Columbia's City Council to seek "a balance of interests in the legislation" after the council Dec. 1 gave preliminary approval to a bill to legalize same-sex marriage.

In an 11-2 vote the council passed the Religious Freedom and Civil Marriage Equality Amendment Act of 2009. A required second vote was to take place in the weeks ahead, then the bill was to be sent on to Washington Mayor Adrian Fenty, who has said he will sign it.

District laws also are subject to congressional review under the Home Rule Charter.

"As the legislation moves forward, the Archdiocese of Washington will continue its dialogue with the council," Susan Gibbs, spokeswoman for the archdiocese, said in a Dec. 1 statement.

As written, the current legislation would require faith-based social service providers to compromise their religious teachings and beliefs on gay marriage in order to be eligible to partner with the district government in providing social services to Washington residents.

The Washington Archdiocese is morally opposed to the bill because it redefines marriage. The church's opposition is based on the Catholic Church's teaching that marriage is a permanent union between one man and one woman.

Archdiocesan officials have expressed concern that the bill as written would severely limit the ability of its agency Catholic Charities to work with the city in serving the poor. But they also have emphasized that contrary to media reports, the agency will continue to serve the city's poor regardless of the outcome of the same-sex marriage bill.

"We have a long history of service and are committed to continuing to serve. We hope we can work out a bill that balances interests. The needs in D.C. are so great; we need to work together to maximize support for the vulnerable," Gibbs said.

The archdiocese, Catholic Charities and "our other agencies are committed to continuing to serve the people of the District of Columbia as we have done for more than 80 years, with the resources available to us," said Gibbs.

Catholic Charities of Washington is not to be confused with Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Baltimore.

Catholic Charities serves 68,000 people in the District of Columbia regardless of their faith, and recently won the 2009 National Capital Business Ethics Award for demonstrating a firm commitment to ethical business practices, management philosophies and response to crises or challenges.

Council member Tommy Wells said Catholic Charities is just one of several charitable organizations that contract with the city to serve the needy.

Gibbs said Catholic Charities is not as replaceable and dispensable as Wells has suggested.

Archdiocesan officials also have repeatedly expressed concerns about the bill's religious freedom exemption, which they consider to be flawed.

During hearings in October, Catholic officials testified that the bill would restrict the free exercise of religious beliefs and leave the archdiocese and other religious institutions vulnerable to lawsuits.

But council members failed to work toward a compromise on the religious freedom exemption even after the archdiocese and several other witnesses pointed to its flaws in testimony before the council.

If the bill becomes law, the district will join New Hampshire, Connecticut, Iowa, Vermont and Massachusetts in legalizing same-sex marriage.

In New York, the Senate was working on a bill to rewrite the definition of marriage in that state. In a Dec. 1 statement, Richard Barnes, executive director of the New York Catholic Conference, urged lawmakers to “stand firm in defense of marriage.”

“In the last several years, voters in 31 states have taken up the issue of changing the timeless definition of marriage and 31 times they have voted to preserve marriage as the union of one man and one woman,” he said.

Barnes noted that “opinion polls routinely overstate public support for this radical social experiment.” He cited Maine as an example where “advocates for reinventing marriage outspent their opponents” but could not sway voters. They rejected same-sex marriage Nov. 3, overturning a marriage equality law passed in May.

“The Maine example follows a pattern wherever a homosexual ‘marriage’ initiative goes before voters – opinion,” added Barnes, noting “there is no reason to believe the same is not true in New York.”

In New Jersey, which also is considering a bill to redefine marriage, the state’s bishops signed a joint statement urging the state’s Catholics to observe Nov. 29 as a day of prayer for the sanctity of marriage.

In the statement, the bishops reiterated that marriage is a union of one man and one woman and said they would “not stand silent” about proposed legislation to change the definition.