

Money, political clout set tone for N.Y. debate over same-sex marriage

WASHINGTON – It was a fight involving an age-old definition of marriage, with several Catholics playing key roles.

But in the end, the effort to stop a same-sex marriage bill in the New York Legislature came down to money and political favors – neither of which were at the disposal of Catholic leaders and their allies working to keep the traditional view that marriage can only be between one man and one woman.

“Money talked in this case,” said Dennis Poust, director of communications for the New York State Catholic Conference, in an interview with Catholic News Service.

By a 33-29 vote late June 24, the state Senate approved legislation making same-sex marriage legal in New York state. Gov. Andrew Cuomo, a Democrat and a Catholic, signed it into law later that evening.

Poust said the strategy used by proponents of the legislation was “very simple – millions and millions of dollars from wealthy gay-rights advocates from all over the country, a billionaire mayor in New York City willing to spend whatever it took and an extremely determined governor willing to do anything to get his way.”

“That’s not something the church can compete with,” he added in a telephone interview from the conference’s headquarters in Albany, N.Y. “We don’t have money to throw around and even if we did, it wouldn’t be permitted.”

Poust also said there were “all sorts of backroom deals and promises to senators” who voted to support same-sex marriage, as well as pledges by New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg to “open up the pocketbooks” for those legislators. “There was a lot of arm twisting, a lot of cajoling,” he said.

In a message to Catholic New Yorkers after the vote, the heads of the eight New York dioceses thanked the legislators and citizens who worked for defeat of the legislation.

“We know the pressure that was brought to bear on them, and we admire their courage and yours in attempting to defend marriage and protect religious freedom,” the bishops said. “Many surely believed that Catholics would simply shrug their shoulders and go along with this radical act of social engineering. Yet you did not do that.”

The bishops expressed “particular disappointment with those elected officials who publicly profess fidelity to our Catholic religion but whose public stance is at odds with a fundamental teaching of that faith.”

Among those voting in favor of same-sex marriage was Republican Sen. Mark J. Grisanti of Buffalo, N.Y., who said on the Senate floor that “as a Catholic I was raised to believe marriage is between a man and a woman.”

But he said he “would not respect myself if I did not make an informed decision based on the information before me,” and had ultimately concluded that “I cannot deny anyone in my district and across New York the same rights I have with my wife.”

Poust said the New York bishops have expressed frustration with Catholic legislators who say they are personally opposed to same-sex marriage but feel compelled to vote for it anyway.

“The idea that you can claim to be a faithful Catholic and take a position that is at the opposite extreme of what the church teaches is no longer acceptable,” he said.

Passage of the same-sex marriage legislation prompted Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio of Brooklyn to direct Catholic schools in his diocese “to refuse any distinction or honors” bestowed by Cuomo or by any legislator that voted for same-sex marriage and to tell pastors and principals “not to invite any state legislator to speak or be present at any parish or school celebration.”

Poust said he did not expect adoption of a similar policy statewide, but “it will continue to be a diocesan bishop’s call” about what to do in his own diocese.

The legislation exempts any clergy members who decline to perform same-sex weddings and protects any employee “being managed, directed or supervised by or

in conjunction with a religious corporation, benevolent order or a not-for-profit corporation.”

It also says failure to provide same-sex ceremonies would not “result in any state or local government action to penalize, withhold benefits, or discriminate against such religious corporation, benevolent order, a not-for-profit corporation operated, supervised or controlled by a religious corporation.”

When the law takes effect, probably in late July, New York will become the sixth state to permit same-sex marriage, more than doubling the number of people for whom same-sex marriage will be an option. It currently is allowed in Connecticut, Iowa, Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Vermont, in addition to the District of Columbia.

Renewed efforts to pass same-sex legislation or place the issue before voters are expected in Maryland, Rhode Island, Maine, Oregon, Delaware, Minnesota, North Carolina and elsewhere.

Meanwhile, despite what they called a “sad moment in our state’s history,” the New York bishops and their representatives at the Catholic conference will continue to work with Cuomo and the Legislature on behalf of the poor and vulnerable, the unborn and Catholic school parents, among others, Poust said.

“We can’t afford to cut off relations with legislators or with the governor because we have other fights to fight,” he said. “There are many more issues of grave concern to us. So we’ll just get up and brush ourselves off and continue on.”