

New Hampshire nears same-sex civil unions

MANCHESTER, N.H. - Despite the objections of Catholic officials, New Hampshire moved a step closer to legalizing same-sex civil unions when Gov. John Lynch said that he would sign such legislation if the state Senate passes it.

Bishop John B. McCormack of Manchester said the issue is not one of rights but of keeping “the meaning and the reality of marriage intact.”

“Our goal should be how to strengthen marriage and not to enact laws which devalue marriage and deny it its unique and protected status in our society,” he said.

Diocesan chancellor Diane Murphy Quinlan, who had testified against the legislation when it was in the House, expressed “great disappointment” at the governor’s decision.

Quoting the bill’s language granting same-sex couples in civil unions “the same rights, responsibilities and obligations as married couples,” Quinlan said the bill effectively enacts same-sex marriage “no matter what you call it.”

The civil union legislation was adopted by the House by a 243-129 vote April 4. It was scheduled for a floor vote April 26 in the Senate, where it was expected to pass.

Lynch said April 19, in an interview with The Associated Press, that he would sign it if it came to his desk.

Civil unions were not a campaign issue in state elections swept by Democrats last November. For the first time since the 19th century, the party gained control of the

House, Senate and governor's office at the same time.

In her House testimony opposing the bill, Quinlan said, "Two persons of the same gender, no matter how loving and nurturing their relationship may be, cannot fulfill the responsibilities or the obligations of a husband and wife. ... Marriage exists between one man and one woman."

The civil union legislation parallels the state's marriage legislation in prohibiting someone from entering a same-sex civil union with close relatives like siblings or cousins, or pairings of aunt with niece, uncle with nephew or parent or grandparent with offspring.

The legislation would make New Hampshire the fifth state to give those in registered same-sex unions the same rights and obligations as married couples.

The Vermont and New Jersey legislatures enacted civil union laws under court orders and the Connecticut Legislature enacted such a law while a court challenge to its marriage laws was pending.

Massachusetts is the only state that explicitly recognizes same-sex unions as marriages. The Legislature there acted under a mandate of the state's Supreme Judicial Court, which in 2003 declared that legislation restricting the definition of marriage to the union between a man and a woman violated the state constitution.