

# Same-sex marriage bill advances

**By Elizabeth Skalski**

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ANNAPOLIS – The Maryland Senate is expected to begin debate Feb. 23 on a bill that would legalize same-sex marriage in the state.

The Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee approved the bill in a 7-4 vote Feb. 21, the same vote as last year, and sent it along to the Senate floor.

If the bill passes as expected in the Senate, where it was approved last year, it would go into effect in January 2013. It could be petitioned as early as next week, however, to be added to a statewide referendum in the November general election, according to Kathy Dempsey, a Maryland Catholic Conference spokeswoman.

Needing 71 votes to pass in the House of Delegates, where the bill failed last year, it cleared that chamber Feb. 17 in a 72-67 vote.

Cardinal Edwin F. O'Brien, in Rome for his elevation to the College of Cardinals Feb. 18, called the bill's passing in the house "a sad day for the State of Maryland and for Maryland families."

"In one fleeting moment," Cardinal O'Brien said in a Feb. 17 statement, "the House of Delegates moved our state one step closer to undoing what civilizations surely have upheld for thousands of years, one step closer to violating a law deeply embedded in human nature, with tectonic repercussions for the future of family life and the common good of all.

"Neither the Church nor the state has the right to alter the life-giving union created by God for the benefit of all society ... this even for an attractive but fleeting goal for profitable political gain.

Maryland would be the eighth state, in addition to the District of Columbia, to allow gay marriage.

Del. Tiffany T. Alston, a Prince George's County Democrat, surprised colleagues by voting 'yes' in support of the bill. Before changing her vote, Alston petitioned an amendment, which was approved, allowing for the issue to go to referendum.

The House vote came one week after a joint hearing Feb. 10 by the House Judiciary Committee and the House Health and Government Operations

Del. John A. Olszewski Jr., a Baltimore County Democrat and United Methodist who voted in support of the bill, told the Catholic Review he "couldn't find any compelling reason" to vote against it but acknowledged that he prefers civil unions.

Olszewski said he expects the measure will be petitioned to referendum in November.

"Let the people decide - that's the process that's in place. I think people are fairly divided on this issue, I think it will be close," Olszewski said. "No father or pastor or any religious officiate is going to be required to perform ceremonies they don't believe in."

Del. Heather R. Mizeur, a Montgomery County Democrat who is openly gay and a Catholic, told the Catholic Review she voted in support of the bill "to protect all families in Maryland and bring justice and equality to our state."

"(The bill passing) means that we are living up to our greatest ideals as a state honoring and protecting families and treating everyone fairly under the law," Mizeur said.

Gov. Martin O'Malley (D), a Catholic, is sponsoring the bill which would establish a new definition of marriage.

National lawmakers, including New York Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, former Republican National Committee Chairman Ken Mehlman and Cardinal O'Brien have called Annapolis lawmakers on the issue, according to The Baltimore Sun.

The same-sex marriage law, or the Civil Marriage Protection Act, continues to face opposition by faith leaders. Supporters of traditional marriage argue that marriage is an institution that has preceded law and that marriage is between a man and a woman.