

Testimony on marriage bills is standing room only

ANNAPOLIS - In a Feb. 28 hearing on bills concerning same-sex marriage, both sides testified in front of a hearing room so packed that people were wedged into the corners and TV crews stood behind legislators.

At issue were a bundle of bills that would preserve traditional marriage, legalize same-sex marriage or create civil unions.

House Bill 1345, Maryland's Marriage Protection Act, is a constitutional amendment to protect marriage as the union of one man and one woman. If the bill - introduced by Del. Don H. Dwyer Jr. of Anne Arundel and Prince George's Counties, and sponsored by 34 other legislators - is passed, it would need the approval of voters in a statewide referendum. Once approved by the voters, it would prevent any further challenges to the definition of marriage.

House Bill 351, the Religious Freedom and Civil Marriage Protection Act, would legalize same-sex marriage in Maryland, altering the legal definition of marriage. Forty members of the house co-sponsored that bill, introduced by Del. Ben Barnes of Anne Arundel and Prince George's Counties.

House Bills 570, 631, 848, 112 and 1174 would create either civil unions or domestic partnerships, giving those relationships the same rights and benefits as marriage.

Testifying before the House Judiciary Committee, proponents of same-sex marriage attempted to cast their position as a struggle for civil rights, drawing analogies to the days when interracial marriage was illegal.

One woman recounted how she was unable to make funeral arrangements after her partner of many years died because she wasn't a legal relative - fortunately her partner's family was accepting of her - and others testified about concerns they wouldn't be allowed to make health care decisions.

"God didn't give you the right to visit your loved one in the hospital - the

government did that,” said Del. Barnes, sponsor of HB 351.

But Peter Sprigg, vice president for policy at The Family Research Council, said, “Remember this: Marriage is not primarily a religious institution or a civil institution – at its heart it is a natural institution. Marriage arose because society needs to reproduce itself and society needs the mother and father who produced them to cooperate in raising them.”

He added, “Society gives benefits to marriage because marriage gives benefits to society.”

Richard J Dowling, executive director of the Maryland Catholic Conference, the legislative lobbying arm of Maryland’s Catholic bishops, testified in favor of HB 1345.

“Our position is not about denying a person their rights as a citizen, rather our position is one of affirmation,” he said, noting that supporting the bill would affirm traditional marriage. He pointed out that most of the services, rights and responsibilities that same-sex marriage advocates claim to be denied are already available to all citizens, through the use of such legal documents as a durable power of attorney.

Mr. Dowling testified that legalizing slots was put to voters statewide, and the issue of marriage deserves no less consideration.

One supporter of marriage, who was from Africa, said in a heavy accent: “When you try to change the order of things that God has created, there is chaos.”

For more information or to contact your legislators, visit the Maryland Catholic Conference’s Web site at www.mdccathcon.org