

Ban on LGBT discrimination could go before Hillsborough voters in 2016

TAMPA — It wasn't long ago that Hillsborough County banned gay pride parades.

What a difference a couple of years make.

The pride parade prohibition was lifted in 2013. A year later, the county commission moved unanimously to ban government discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity. Along the way, a historic U.S. Supreme Court decision opened the door for hundreds of Hillsborough same-sex couples to marry.

Now, voters may get the chance to cement a ban on discrimination against LGBT individuals.

Hillsborough's Charter Review Board, a 14-member body selected by commissioners that meets every five years to recommend changes to the county charter, is weighing whether to add sexual orientation and gender identity to the charter's anti-discrimination section. The charter is essentially the county's constitution.

The board convened last week to debate language for the new provision and could vote to send it to referendum at its Dec. 1 meeting.

If approved by a super majority of the review board, or 10 members, it would go before voters on the November 2016 ballot.

Commissioner Kevin Beckner, the county's first openly gay commissioner, said he expects county voters will ultimately approve the referendum.

"I have always believed the community was a lot more willing to embrace human rights than our leaders have been; they've always been in front of them," said Beckner, who championed the 2014 ordinance banning discrimination against gay individuals. "Now they've converged together not only to strengthen our social fabric but to promote economic development and prosperity."

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Tampa Pride Parade participants march down Seventh Avenue in Ybor City on March 28. This year's parade was the city's first gay pride parade in 13 years

Even compared to the rapid evolution of the rest of the country, Hillsborough's shift on LGBT rights has been swift and drastic. The ban on gay pride events was not a vestige of a bygone era; it passed the Hillsborough County board in 2005.

During last week's meeting, the charter review board appeared poised to let voters decide. Of the board's 14 members, 12 were appointed by commissioners who voted for the county's 2014 LGBT discrimination ban. The other two were appointed by Commissioner Stacy White, who joined the county commission this year.

None of the members spoke out against the referendum, though there were questions about how it should be worded and how the county defined "sexual orientation" and "gender identification."

"I don't understand what 'gender identity' is," said former Temple Terrace Mayor Joe Affronti, a board member appointed by Commissioner Victor Crist.

"Does that mean that like in some areas where if a boy says that he is really a female that he can go into a female's bathroom?" Affronti said. "My point is not whether this should pass or not. The point is I need to know what I'm going to vote on."

There was also debate on whether to add "ex-gay" individuals to the anti-discrimination policy after several citizens spoke out. Some board members pointed out the proposed language would cover all sexual orientations, though county attorneys will review it anyway.

Still, gaining the approval of 10 out of 14 members is a high threshold to meet to get the question on the ballot. And opposition, particularly from the Christian right, remains vocal.

"I'm questioning why this is being brought up as a charter change. It is already in effect law," Amber Kelly, a field director for the Hillsborough County leg of Florida Family Action, said at last week's meeting. "It makes it much more difficult to change things should they need to be changed later on."

In an interview Friday, Beckner pointed out that the county passed some LGBT protections in 1991 that a subsequent board removed in 1995. By codifying those protections in the county charter, Beckner said, that would prevent future commissions from undoing those protections.

"It's very personally moving for myself," Beckner said, "it's emotional for myself."

"Not only for me personally but for the future of our community and our children so that by the letter of the law they can embrace themselves and live their version of the American dream without fear of discrimination from government."

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