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Coming out in droves to protest

Sarah T. Williams, Star Tribune

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GLBT07

A vocal floor-to-ceiling crowd filled the State Capitol rotunda Thursday to protest a bill that would remove sexual orientation as a protected class under the state's Human Rights Act.

As many as 1,600 people cheered and hollered as DFL legislators, Minneapolis City Council members, high school students, clergy members, a former Vikings player and polar explorer Ann Bancroft spoke out against the bill.

"Our sled is moving, and we are not going to go back," said Bancroft, a lesbian. "Some of the greatest obstacles I have faced in my life have not been on the ice. They have been people's attitudes -- about what I can or cannot do, and what I should or should not be. This is a political obstacle, and we will clamber over it."

Scott Dibble, DFL-Minneapolis, the only openly gay state senator, told the crowd: "We are up against tough, mean-spirited foes. You [the bill's authors] may try to delete us from the statute books, but you'll never delete us from the neighborhoods . . . the schools . . . the workplaces . . . the hospitals . . . the police forces of this great state. We are here to stay."

Said former Viking Esera Tuaolo, who disclosed last year that he is gay: "It doesn't take a rocket scientist to know that what they are doing is wrong."

The bill, sponsored by Rep. Arlon Lindner, R-Corcoran, seeks to repeal a 1993 amendment to the state's Human Rights Act that makes it illegal to discriminate on the basis of someone's sexual orientation -- along with race, religion, ethnicity and physical or mental disability. A similar bill has been introduced in the Senate.



Supporters of gay and lesbian rights rallied in the rotunda.

Judy Griesedieck
 Star Tribune



The protesters also met with legislators.

Judy Griesedieck
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Supporters of the bill say that the 1993 amendment has conferred "special rights" on gays and lesbians and that it has been used "as a vehicle for intimidation" and has "promoted homosexuality" in the schools. Opponents of the bill say it represents a giant step backward in the state's human rights record.

Gov. Tim Pawlenty's office said Thursday that

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he would not sign the bill. "He [Pawlenty] is extremely supportive of human rights," said spokeswoman Leslie Kupchella. "This [law] is not about gay rights or 'special rights' -- it is about human rights and fairness for all. He does not believe that anyone should be discriminated against for a job or housing simply because they are gay."

Tom Prichard, president of the Minnesota Family Council, which has lobbied in favor of the bill, was unperturbed. "The governor has said in the past he has problems with the law. I would assume he still does."

Pawlenty voted in 1993 to include sexual orientation in the human rights law. But as he sought the Republican gubernatorial endorsement last year, he told Republican activists that he regretted that vote.

The problem with the law, Prichard said, is that it "protects a group of people based on behavior. I think that is a distortion of the intent of protected-class status, which is traditionally the racial groups."

'I don't hate them'

Lindner, a six-term Republican, said in an interview Thursday that complaints from constituents about "homosexuality being promoted in the schools" prompted him to write the bill.

He said that when constituents tried to raise concerns about programs, posters or pamphlets they found sexually explicit or objectionable, they would be told by school administrators that nothing could be done about it because "it's the law."

Lindner said 1 percent of the population should not be "instructing" the other 99 percent on same-sex practices in the schools. He cited a rise in sexually transmitted diseases among young people "because of oral sex" and said, "We shouldn't be promoting this to our kids and calling it 'safe.' I'm just waiting for a lawsuit against the schools, when a kid comes up with a disease and they can trace it back to what they are learning in school."

He also said the law unfairly restricts business owners: "If they don't want a cross-dresser sitting at the front desk, they should have a right not to hire that person. . . . Today, they can be sued."

And he argued with objections to removing sexual orientation as a classification in the law's definition of Holocaust survivors and victims.

"I was a child during World War II, and I've read a lot about World War II," he said. "It's just been recently that anyone's come out with this idea that homosexuals were persecuted to this extent. There's been a lot of rewriting of history."

'Wrong message'

Throughout the day, the 1,500 to 1,600 gay-rights supporters, a number estimated by State Capitol security officials, also met with their senators and representatives to make a case against the bill or seek other support. They were young and old, gay and straight.

In a meeting with Rep. Jim Davnie, DFL-Minneapolis, Joyce Momont, 78, of south Minneapolis, spoke of her fears for her son.

"Our son came out to us in 1976, 17 years before the 1993 bill was passed," she said. "As the mother of a gay son, you can only imagine those years of worry and concern about his safety . . . the number of times he would come home and say that somebody had assaulted him. So 1993 was a big year for us. We just can't go backwards."

Davnies told the group of about six visitors to "ratchet up the clamor" on the bill, House File 341.

"People should be hired based on their qualifications for the job, and fired based on their performance," he said. "They should be rented apartments or sold houses based on their ability to make the monthly mortgage or rent. They should be judged in their community by what sort of neighbor they are. . . . When legislation like HF 341 comes forward, it sends the wrong message."

'Not mean-spirited'

Meanwhile, in the offices of House Speaker Steve Sviggum, R-Kenyon, constituents were making a plea to restore benefits for same-sex domestic partners of state employees.

Sviggum, by working to restore sick and bereavement leave to the labor contract, said he had been "hit by both sides" on the issue and had struck a middle ground.

He chided DFLers, accusing them of "a little bit of hypocrisy" for not "offering an amendment or a bill to bring their words forth in action on same-sex benefits."

And he said he does not support HF 341 "as it is written." But he vigorously defended his House colleague.

"I know Arlon Lindner, and I can guarantee you he is not mean-spirited. I think there should be no discrimination in the workforce or in housing because of race, gender or sexual orientation. Where Arlon is coming from, is [his objection] to the teaching of gay and lesbian lifestyles in the schools."

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