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Outlines

County DP benefits prop passes committee: Full Cook County board may vote April 6

by P.J. Engelbrecht

The Cook County Board's Human Relations Committee met March 18 with one agenda item: to consider offering domestic- partnership benefits to County workers. The Committee had deferred the matter at its March 11 meeting.

After three hours of testimony and often- contentious discussion, the HR Committee voted 3- 2 to pass chair Mike Quigley's proposal Thursday. It may come before the full County Board April 6.

Commissioners Bobbie Steele, Cal Sutker and Quigley voted "aye." Commissioners Pat Moran and Peter Silvestri cast the nays. Two committee members, Commissioners Allan Carr and Herbert Schumann, were absent. About 100 citizens, pro and con, watched from the gallery.

Not himself a committee member, 'visiting' conservative Commissioner Carl Hansen repeatedly and belligerently stalled the opening of proceedings by raising contentious queries and points of order (as did Moran, to a lesser extent).

County Board President John Stroger put in an appearance, visibly lending his support to Quigley and helping to control obstructionist kibitzing. Stroger was accused of "choking off debate." More supportive Commissioner Roberto Maldonado also attended.

As more than two hours of testimony and additional questioning of some speakers- mainly by the persistent Hansen-concluded, Sutker said, "at this time, I would like to move the adoption [of the measure]." Steele seconded the motion.

Urging further study of costs, Moran attempted to amend the proposal to cover both same- and opposite-sex partners, but there was no second to his motion.

Hansen also had argued the proposal would be too costly, but his concerns over its legality proved unfounded, as State's Attorney staff lawyer Elizabeth Reidy and several citizen witnesses verified.

Ensuing discussion indicated how committee members would vote. "I believe this ordinance is a first step ... [toward a] level playing field for all employees," Sutker began.

Steele, the only African- American committee member, said she was "very proud to have the opportunity to vote on this issue. ... I have come to the conclusion that this is the right thing to do. Injustice anywhere is injustice everywhere."

Although Republican Silvestri even- handedly vice- chaired a sometimes raucous meeting, he revealed personal ambivalence, perhaps preferring an all- inclusive ordinance, implying that his constituents rejected the current proposal.

Silvestri voted against it, even after he said, "I don't respect appeals to hatred," referring to much opposition rhetoric.

Quigley had the last word. During his 1998 campaign, the gay-positive committee chair had vowed to push this DP benefits plan, and now his promise hung in the balance.

"In the end, we strive for fairness," Quigley declared. "We are a diverse people, but ... we live under layers and blankets of laws. ... Cost shouldn't matter when it comes to fairness. ...

"I respect everyone's opinion; I care about everyone's rights, but in the end, this is about fairness. ... I think we should move forward," he concluded.

"The ayes have it," Quigley proclaimed moments later, after the roll call vote.

"I am more relieved than happy," Quigley said after his first legislative victory. "This [Committee] is a new body. ... This is a whole different ballgame [and] we're not done yet. ... [but] this is a major first step."

The full County Board will consider and may vote on the DP benefits proposal at its April 6 meeting. Quigley believes "We have enough votes as co-sponsors to pass the full board."

Quigley aide Alicia Obando said she was "pleased but ... not surprised" by the successful vote Thursday and explained the proposal will be sent as a recommendation to the full board. "I don't know if there will be more opposition or not," she said. "I'm very optimistic that [it] can pass."

The vocal, largely fundamentalist Christian opposition attending the Committee meeting will turn out in force to fight a civil-rights measure some called "ungodly" and characterized as an insidious step toward legalizing gay and lesbian marriage.

Nine opponents spoke out against the proposal Thursday, including notoriously anti-gay Rev. Hiram Crawford, who called it "a wicked law." Crawford has fought the City of Chicago's DP benefits ordinance in the courts-to date, unsuccessfully.

The 14 LGBT community members and straight allies who testified in favor of County DP benefits included lawyers, clergy, educators and political figures. Lesbian community leaders and Cook County employees Joann Trapani and Vernita Gray were in the audience.

"Are gay and lesbian people asking for special rights? No," former Human Rights Campaign board member Gary Cozette declared. "[We're] asking for equal pay for equal work."

"I view it as only fair and equal, not [as] any special rights," seconded openly gay Chicago Streets and Sanitation supervisor Don Nowotny. "I encourage all Committee members to vote for this."

Illinois NOW board member Lorna Brett, gay vets leader Jim Darby and his partner Pat Bova, Rabbi Suzanne Griffel, Rev. Lynn Ungar, Bishop James Wilkowski and John Marshall law professor Mark Wojcik also strongly backed offering DP benefits to same-sex partners.

"This board has the opportunity to take a step forward for all the citizens of this county," Griffel said.

"Remember the codified injustices. ... You and I owe it to [past victims of discrimination] not to perpetuate any injustice."

Human resources officers of Northwestern University and the University of Chicago -both of which offer employees DP benefits -presented data suggesting the County would not significantly increase benefits costs if the proposal were adopted.

About 1% of workers might be expected to apply for same- sex DP benefits, as in the City of Chicago. County costs are projected to be less than \$300,000 annually. Generally, benefits now constitute about 40% of a worker's compensation, so DP benefits are no longer considered a mere "perk."

Skadden Arps lawyer David Springer said that offering DP benefits has actually benefited the huge Chicago- based law firm by "put[ting] us in a position to compete on equal footing" with the dozens of U.S. corporations and municipalities now offering them.

Wojcik and Brett both stated firmly that the same- sex- only proposal is, in Wojcik's words, "completely Constitutional" and not likely to be struck down in the courts. Earlier, Brett had bluntly criticized the opposition.

"Let's not pretend that the emperor has clothes on," she chided. "It's about homophobia. ... [Passing] this is what we should be doing ... and I know there's a lot of support out there for this [measure]."

A handful of citizens testified in favor of all- inclusive domestic- partnership benefits, recommending 'compromise' by amending the proposed ordinance to include both same- sex and opposite- sex partners.

However, pro- ordinance commissioners and witnesses demurred, saying once the lesbian- oriented proposal had become law, expansion to (marriageable) straight couples could be considered.

Byron Cleaves, a straight man who has brought suit against the Chicago Police Department for allegedly firing him after he took a leave day when his female partner's father died, and Thomas Coleman of the American Association of Single People, a think- tank turned tiny membership organization, both argued for inclusivity.

By interrupting the proceedings and arguing 'out of order,' anti- gay Pastor Jeffrey Haynes managed to testify for a second time, though he'd already had his allotted three minutes at the March 11 Committee meeting. Quigley also allowed three others to testify a second time: pro, gay partners John Pennycuff and Robert Castillo; and con, Gregory Morrow.

A self- proclaimed "expert on homosexuality," anti- gay Wayne Leland was not allowed to testify twice Thursday, despite creating a disturbance that almost led to his ejection from the chamber.

*** Lambda Publications, The Weekly Voice of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Trans Community, 1115 W. Belmont 2D, Chicago, IL 60657; PH (773) 871-7610; FAX (773) 871-7609. See **Outlines, Nightlines, Out Resource Guide, Clout! Business Report, Blacklines** and **En La Vida** on the web at <http://www.suba.com/~outlines/>. E-mail feedback to outlines@suba.com!**