

N.J. lawmakers approve gay marriage, but veto looms

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TRENTON, N.J. (RNS) Even as Gov. Chris Christie's threat of a "swift" veto looms, gay rights activists are celebrating after the state Assembly voted on Thursday (Feb. 16) on a bill to legalize same-sex marriage in New Jersey.

With supporters imploring lawmakers to make history, the lower house passed the bill after hours of debate on a day that began with protests and prayer vigils under gloomy skies outside the Statehouse.

"Without question, this is a historic day in the state of New Jersey," said Assembly Speaker Sheila Oliver, who, along with Senate President Stephen Sweeney, a fellow Democrat, made the measure a top priority.

The Senate, which failed to pass a gay marriage bill two years ago, easily approved it Monday. The governor's office would not say when Christie would respond.

Thursday's 42-33 tally did not include a single Republican vote, and two Democrats voted no.

Gay rights activists were joyous after the vote, vowing they'd fight to overturn Christie's expected veto -- and saying it bolsters a gay marriage court challenge in its early stages.

"We can always say for the rest of our lives we passed a marriage equality bill in New Jersey," said Steven Goldstein, chairman of the gay rights advocacy group Garden State Equality. "This shows legislative intent to the court. After today, no one can doubt that the Legislature of the state of New Jersey wants marriage equality."

It will be tough, however, to overturn Christie's expected veto.

Assemblyman Reed Gusciora, a sponsor of the bill and one of two openly gay lawmakers, said supporters have until the legislative session ends in January 2014 to garner the nearly dozen more votes needed to override. He said it had won nearly 10 Assembly votes in recent weeks.

In Thursday's debate, several lawmakers, including Oliver, said they initially opposed gay marriage or struggled with the decision because of their religious beliefs.

Assemblyman Charles Mainor said he had believed voting yes would emotionally harm children and force them into therapy. "I felt this way because I was ignorant," he said. "And I was ignorant because I didn't educate myself."

Assemblyman Troy Singleton, a sponsor, said that as a former altar boy at an urban Catholic parish, "this road wasn't very easy to get to."

Assemblywoman Cleopatra Tucker, a deaconess in her church, said she also struggled over her decision. "In my final hours, I came to the conclusion that the people sent me from my district here to vote for what was right and to protect all the people ... regardless of their gender, race, religion or sexual preference," she said. "This bill today is not a religious issue. It's a civil rights issue."

Republicans opposing the bill said the vote on gay marriage belongs to New Jersey residents -- as Christie has urged -- rather than the lawmakers and the governor.

"Who should be the ultimate judge on deciding this issue? Should it be the 121 of us in Trenton? Or should we let the people of New Jersey decide?" said Assemblywoman Nancy Munoz. "I trust the people of New Jersey and believe that they should be allowed to voice their opinion for a vote."

Assemblywoman Alison Littell McHose questioned Democrats' priorities in making this bill their first of the new session when New Jerseyans are complaining about high unemployment, property taxes and big government.

"Send a message about your priorities and reject this legislation, and let's get back to the real issues facing struggling families," she said.
"Vote no today and let's move forward."

Before the vote, more than 50 gay marriage opponents -- most dressed in red -- marched outside the Statehouse, holding signs that said "Let the people decide." Several pastors led them in prayer. Supporters of the bill, many dressed in blue T-shirts bearing the word "Equality," packed the Assembly gallery and later held a victory rally at a hotel near the Statehouse.

Gay marriage is legal in six states and the District of Columbia. A new Washington state law will take effect in June.