



Hillsborough review board kills charter amendment for LGBT protections



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TAMPA — Aligned but not allied, LGBT activists and religious conservatives surprisingly came together Tuesday to urge the Hillsborough County charter review board to back away from a charter amendment that would strengthen protections for gays and lesbians.

The review board, a body that meets every five years to recommend changes to the county charter, conceded to the wishes of the vocal crowd and voted 11-1 against a charter amendment that would have barred discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity. Had it passed, Hillsborough residents would have decided on whether to ratify the changes in a 2016 ballot referendum.

The amendment would have added to the charter, essentially the county's constitution, the same protections against discrimination for LGBT individuals that already exist in Hillsborough for race, color, sex, age, national origin, religion, disability or political affiliation. Commissioners passed a similar ordinance in 2014. But approving a charter amendment would have prevented future commissions from backtracking.

Dozens of people spoke on the matter, but not a single one voiced support for moving the referendum forward.

Opposition to the charter amendment from religious conservatives made up the bulk of public comment. They offered familiar arguments that it would trample on their religious freedom and feared that it would become easier for predators to sexually assault women or children in public bathrooms because they could pretend they are transgender.

Hillsborough County's existing county ordinance, however, specifically exempts bathrooms.

"I promise if you move forward with this, I will fight every step of the way," said Travis Smith, a pastor at Hillsdale Baptist Church.

Similar arguments persuaded Houston voters to defeat an anti-discrimination ordinance there. Many in the audience Tuesday were offended by that argument.

"Tonight, I have been marginalized with a child molester," said Mike Reedy of Equality Florida. "This is exactly what would happen if this becomes a ballot initiative. You will see a majority talk about the rights of a minority using false truths, using scare tactics to make you believe and make the population believe that the LGBT community is one that is out to get your wives and your daughters. And we're not."

It was opposition from gay-rights groups such as Equality Florida and PFLAG Tampa that put the nail in the amendment's coffin. They said that they were content with the 2014 ordinance for now. They also believed it could derail other legislative priorities in 2016.

Charter review board member Jan Platt, who first proposed the amendment this summer, made the motion to kill it.

Gerald White was the lone dissenter and said he was disappointed by activists who backed away from the amendment out of fear or to advance other agendas.

"To me, as a citizen, something is wrong with that," he said.

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