

Arizona City Set Pass State's First Civil Union Ordinance

A former Arizona copper mining town reborn as an artists' community is poised to become on Tuesday the first city in the conservative southwestern state to allow civil unions between same-sex couples.

The City Council in Bisbee, a city of 5,600 residents in southeast Arizona, is set to pass an ordinance allowing any couple regardless of their sex or sexual orientation to join in a civil ceremony.

The Council approved it at a first reading last month by a unanimous vote, and officials expect it to pass at a second reading on Tuesday night, making the city a standout in the state whose constitution recognizes marriage as a union of one man and one woman.

"We're here and we're forging ahead ... We're not going to wait," said Gene Conners, an enthusiastic first-term Council member who proposed the measure.

"To me this is about civil rights. It's about the opportunities and benefits that we all have, and why deny it to that particular group?" he added.

A city founded on a mountain of copper ore in 1902, Bisbee reinvented itself as a laid-back artists' enclave after the local Phelps Dodge mine shut in 1975.

The Council's vote comes as the U.S. Supreme Court is weighing whether to strike down a law that denies federal benefits to legally married same-sex couples, in a move that would reflect growing support in the United States for gay marriage.

A Reuters/Ipsos poll last month found that 55 percent of

Americans surveyed said married gay and lesbian couples should be able to qualify for Social Security survivor payments and other benefits provided to married heterosexual couples.

The proposed ordinance in Bisbee, which a popular local bumper sticker describes as a “liberal oasis in conservative desert,” draws on language in a state civil union bill currently stalled in the Republican-controlled Arizona legislature.

City Hall Certificates

If passed, the ordinance would come into effect in May. Couples would be able to go to City Hall and pay \$76—the cost of a marriage license at the county courthouse—for a civil union certificate.

It would only be valid within the limits of the city, a picturesque trove of landmark buildings, galleries, coffee shops and old miners’ cottages perched in the folds of the Mule Mountains overlooking Mexico.

Benefits extended to couples would include the right to visit their sick partner in the hospital, obtain a family pass for the city swimming pool, and, for city employees, the chance for their partner to buy into their benefits—rights that they do not currently have.

“It’s a wonderful community, and it’s very welcoming. To me it makes perfect sense to eliminate some of the obstacles that prevent people from participating,” Mayor Adriana Badal told Reuters.

Several people have written to the Council to protest the measure, among them at least one business owner who felt that it could hurt local tourism, while others opposed it on religious grounds, including Ralph Bedolla, a pastor from the local Fountains of Living Waters Christian Church.

“Why is this being called a Civil Union ordinance? If all were

up front it would be called what it really is, a Marriage ordinance. It is not called this because I believe that you ... really know that it is wrong," Bedolla wrote the mayor and City Council last week.

He said the sanctity of marriage between a man and a woman "is by far the truth. Nowhere in the history of the Bible or this nation for that fact has that ever been changed."

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