

Illinois Starts Push to Legalize Same-Sex Marriage by Valentine's Day

Democratic lawmakers began a drive to legalize same-sex marriage in Illinois by Valentine's Day, but the fate of the effort is in doubt because the state faces a financial crisis that could overshadow other issues.

A committee of the state Senate on Tuesday approved a measure to legalize **same-sex marriage** by a 9 to 5 vote with Democrats in favor and Republicans opposed, paving the way for a possible vote in the full upper chamber next week.

"Now is the time for the next step in providing equal rights to all people in Illinois," Democratic Governor Pat Quinn said in a statement after the vote.

If approved by the legislature and signed by Quinn, Illinois would be the 10th state, plus the District of Columbia, to legalize same-sex marriages. It also would be the first Midwestern state to approve same-sex marriage through the legislature. Iowa's Supreme Court legalized such marriages there in 2009.

In 2011, Illinois state lawmakers approved civil unions for same-sex couples, but **gay rights advocates** said this did not go far enough. **President Barack Obama** endorsed same-sex marriage last year and recently issued a statement supporting the efforts to legalize same-sex nuptials in his home state.

Rikeesha Phelon, a spokeswoman for state Senate President John Cullerton said: "He is hopeful that we will be able to pass the bill before Valentine's Day."

Supporters of same-sex marriage tried last month to pass a

bill in the state Senate. It was approved by a committee but was never brought to a vote on the floor of the chamber because majority support was uncertain.

Since then, Democrats have gained seats in both the state House and Senate, encouraging supporters to try again.

During the committee debate on Tuesday, opponents cited religious concerns in resisting legalization.

“This bill puts the state very much in the church’s business,” said minister Keith Williams, and he interpreted the Bible as advocating opposition to gay marriage.

To soothe such concerns, sponsors said they revised the bill to allow religious clergy the option to refuse to solemnize such marriages, an approach that helped New York state overcome opposition to gay marriage.

The bill could still be derailed by the state’s financial crisis. Quinn’s “state of the state” speech on Wednesday is expected to be dominated by the grim fiscal situation and calls for action on pension reform.

Some lobbying groups are asking the state legislature to put aside everything else to focus on financial issues.

Three states approved same-sex marriage by referendum in the November election—Maryland, Maine and Washington. Rhode Island, the last state in New England which has not legalized same-sex marriage, moved a step closer last month with approval by its state House of Representatives.

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