Boy Scouts Of America Delays Vote on Ending Ban on Gays

Boy Scouts of America board members on Wednesday delayed until May a vote on whether to end a long-standing and controversial ban on gay membership.

The century-old youth organization had been expected to vote on the matter at a board meeting in Dallas on Wednesday. The Boy Scouts upheld the ban just last year but faced sharp criticism from gay rights groups.

“After careful consideration and extensive dialogue within the scouting family, along with comments from those outside the organization, the volunteer officers of the Boy Scouts of America’s National Executive Board concluded that due to the complexity of this issue, the organization needs time for a more deliberate review of its membership policy,” the Boy Scouts said in an emailed statement.

In the interim, the board will continue its consultations with other scouting representatives, and the approximately 1,400 voting members of the national council will take action on a membership standards resolution in May, the statement said.

The Boy Scouts touched off fierce lobbying by groups both for and against changing the policy when it said on January 28 it was considering removing the national restriction based on sexual orientation and leaving the decision to local chapters.

The national executive board, which lists more than 70 members, has been meeting privately since Monday at a hotel near Boy Scouts headquarters in Irving, Texas.

Many local chapters have said they were waiting for the board to render a verdict before weighing in. A coalition of 33 councils that represent about one-fifth of all youth members has asked the board to delay the vote for more study.

More than 22,800 people have registered comments with the Boy Scouts on the group’s Facebook page since it announced it was considering lifting the ban.

A national poll released by Quinnipiac University on Wednesday found a solid majority of registered voters, 55 percent to 33 percent, favored ending the ban.

Men supported lifting the ban by 49 percent to 39 percent and women by 61 percent to 27 percent, according to the Quinnipiac nation poll of 1,772 registered voters surveyed from January 30 to February 4 with a 2.3 percentage points margin of error.

Gay rights activists, who have said it would not go far enough to lift the national ban but permit local bans to stand, said they were disappointed by the decision to put off a vote.

Activists including Jennifer Tyrrell, a lesbian from Ohio who was forced out as a den leader, delivered more than 1.4 million signatures to the Boy Scouts Monday on petitions seeking an end to the policy.

“A scout is supposed to be brave, and the Boy Scouts failed to be brave today,” Tyrrell said in a statement Wednesday. “The Boy Scouts had the chance to help countless young people and devoted parents, but they’ve failed us yet again.”

Supporters of the ban, including the group “Save Our Scouts,” plan a prayer vigil Wednesday at Boy Scouts headquarters.

The Boy Scouts won a 5 to 4 U.S. Supreme Court ruling in 2000 that upheld its right to ban gays, but the organization has come under increasing public pressure in recent years from activists.

Youth membership in the organization, which prides itself on teaching boys life skills such as camping and leadership, has declined 21 percent to less than 2.7 million since 2000.

Gay rights activists have also been pressing corporations to withhold contributions to the Boy Scouts while the ban stands, including UPS, Merck and the Intel Foundation.

The Boy Scouts has also faced criticism for keeping from public view decades of reports on child sex abuse in the organization. It released thousands of pages of files covering 1965 to 1985 in October under a court order.

Two board members have said publicly they support a change: Jim Turley, chairman and chief executive of Ernst & Young, and AT&T CEO Randall Stephenson.

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