

Boy Scouts of America Expected to Vote on Ending Gay Membership Ban

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

The century-old youth organization upheld the ban just last year but faced sharp criticism from gay rights groups.

The **Boy Scouts** touched off fierce lobbying by groups both for and against changing the policy when it said late last month that 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. The Boy Scouts released no details about the deliberations on Tuesday.

Many local chapters have said they were waiting for the board to render a verdict before weighing in, and 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.

The Boy Scouts has said that if it lifted the national ban, local chapters would be free to accept members and adult leaders consistent with their beliefs. Nearly 70 percent of Boy Scouts units are chartered to religious organizations.

Gay rights activists have said it would not go far enough to lift the national ban but permit local bans to stand. They delivered more than 1.4 million signatures to the Boy Scouts Monday on petitions seeking an end to the policy.

Supporters of the ban including the group "Save our Scouts" plan a prayer vigil Wednesday at Boy Scouts headquarters.

The Boy Scouts won a 5-4 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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