

D.C. Faith Leaders Seek Referendum to Repeal Gay Marriage Law

 A coalition of faith leaders wants to put a referendum on the November ballot to allow District of Columbia residents to vote on the definition of marriage.

The Stand4Marriage DC Coalition filed paperwork with the District of Columbia Board of Elections and Ethics on Wednesday in hopes of mobilizing citizens to repeal a bill passed last month legalizing gay marriage in Washington, D.C. The measure has been signed by Mayor Adrian Fenty and transmitted to Congress, which oversees the district's laws, to begin the required 30-day review period.

Photo: Bishop Harry Jackson, chairman of the Stand4MarriageDC Coalition, leads a rally opposing gay marriage in Washington, D.C.

Attorneys for the coalition said that under district law, once a bill is passed by the council, signed by the mayor and transmitted to Congress, a referendum may be filed with the elections board to allow the citizens to vote on the new law.

"The Home Rule Charter gives D.C. residents the right to the initiative and the referendum process and authorizes a citywide vote on this issue if petitioned to do so by the people," said Cleta Mitchell, an attorney for the Stand4Marriage DC Coalition who expected a hearing on the proposed referendum to be scheduled within two weeks.

The filing followed a hearing Wednesday before District of Columbia Superior Court in a lawsuit the coalition filed against the elections board. The group is seeking to overturn the board's ruling last fall denying a separate initiative

that would define marriage as the union of one man and one woman.

If the elections board decision were reversed, the coalition would begin gathering the signatures required to put the initiative on the ballot. A decision in the lawsuit is expected within a week.

"We are confident the court will clear the obstacles to the citizens initiative powers that have been imposed by the city council-and that we can begin gathering signatures on our initiative right away," said Austin Nimocks, an attorney for the Alliance Defense Fund, which is representing Stand4Marriage DC.

Bishop Harry Jackson, pastor of Hope Christian Church and chairman of Stand4Marriage DC, is hopeful that both the initiative and the referendum will be allowed to move forward.

"If both the initiative and the referendum rights are granted, we will circulate both petitions and give the voters of the District of Columbia the right to not only block the recently enacted same-sex marriage bill, but also to establish that only marriage between one man and one woman will be valid or recognized," Jackson said.

"The citizens of the district are legally authorized to make both of those decisions and we merely seek to empower the voters so they can be able to exercise their lawmaking authority guaranteed by the D.C. Home Rule Charter."

Republican Rep. Jason Chaffetz of Utah, the ranking member of the subcommittee that has oversight over district laws, said he is doubtful there are enough votes in Congress to strike down the bill but would like to see district residents vote on marriage.

Chaffetz has said Democrats in Congress are not interested in trying to repeal the federal Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA),

which prohibits federal recognition of same-sex marriage. But Jackson worries that gay marriage in the nation's capital sets a dangerous precedent.

Next week, Jackson will convene several dozen pastors to discuss strategies to prevent gay marriage from becoming law in Washington, D.C., and elsewhere in the U.S. The mostly African-American ministers also are expected to lobby Congress to protect DOMA, which has been challenged unsuccessfully in several recent lawsuits. President Obama has said he supports its repeal.