

North Carolina Lawmakers Make Strong Stand for Christian Rights in Gay Marriage Era

North Carolina lawmakers voted on Thursday to allow government officials to refuse to perform marriages by citing religious objections, protecting those who oppose same-sex weddings from losing their jobs.

The measure, already passed by the state Senate, heads to Governor Pat McCrory's desk after being approved by the Republican-led House of Representatives in a 67-43 vote.

The Republican governor's office did not comment on whether he will sign the bill. McCrory has said he does not support letting public employees sidestep their duties, but he could allow the measure to become law without his signature.

The bill allows magistrates and other officials to refuse to perform marriages or issue marriage certificates by citing a "sincerely held religious objection." Once they have asked to be recused in writing, magistrates would be barred from performing any marriage, gay or heterosexual, for six months.

During lengthy debate over several days, supporters of the measure said it would offer needed protection for magistrates who have said they would not perform gay marriages since the practice became legal in North Carolina last year.

"Really the question is, should you be fired from a job or subject to disciplinary action because you choose to live your life by sincerely held religious beliefs?" Republican Representative Dean Arp said.

Gay marriage is legal in 37 states and Washington, D.C. The U.S. Supreme Court is expected to decide next month on whether

same-sex marriage should be legal nationwide.

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