

Sunday Rally to Put Houston's Gay Rights Ordinance in Crosshairs

Opponents of Houston's so-called "nondiscrimination ordinance" are using this week's postponement of a City Council vote as an opportunity to galvanize public opposition to the controversial measure.

Steve Riggle, pastor of Houston's 18,000-member Grace Community Church, is expecting thousands of people to pack the church's auditorium for a rally at 5:45 p.m. Sunday to demonstrate that the mayor and council are at odds with the public over the ordinance that would extend special legal protection to lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgender (LGBT) people.

"The people do not have a voice on this issue. The City Council is not standing with the people," Riggle told Charisma News on Friday. "The mayor did not anticipate that public opposition would be so strong."

Houston's openly lesbian mayor, Annise Parker, on Wednesday postponed a scheduled council vote on the measure for two weeks.

At the same time, however, the council approved two amendments to the ordinance that outraged Christians and other conservative opponents. The first would broaden the scope of the measure to impact businesses that employ at least 15 people, versus a threshold of 50 employees—a figure Parker earlier had negotiated with a business coalition called the Greater Houston Partnership.

The second change removed language that said a transgender person who was born male could enter a women's restroom,

shower or locker room if he wore women's clothing. But Riggle contends this makes the ordinance more onerous because it would allow someone whose supposed "gender identity" is opposite from their gender at birth to use the other sex's facilities regardless of how they are dressed.

In a shocking case from Olympia, Washington, Riggle says authorities were prevented from prosecuting a 45-year-old man who walked nude into a girls' locker room because a local law prohibited discrimination based on his transgender identity.

These issues aside, critics say the proposed ordinance in any form is bad policy because it extends legal protection to a class of people defined by their chosen lifestyle.

"Why should LGBT people be given protected status?" Riggle asks. "We already have hate-crime laws on the books to protect people from attacks based on their sexual orientation."

If such protection were to be conferred, Riggle wonders, what about Christians? Shouldn't they be given legal rights to shield them from having to make business decisions that violate their constitutionally protected religious beliefs? Critics have cited instances in which bakers and florists who are Christians have been fined for refusing to supply products and services for same-sex wedding ceremonies.

The megachurch pastor says Parker refuses to answer that question.

The Houston ordinance would extend legal protection that federal law already provides from discrimination on the basis of gender, race, color, ethnicity, age, marital status, religion and other factors to include sexual orientation and gender identity. It provides for fines of up to \$5,000 against violators. City Council debates on the measure have drawn large and vocal attendance by both supporters and critics, while City Hall has been flooded with thousands of phone calls and emails on the issue.

Riggle says the mayor has vastly underestimated the scope and vigor of public opposition to this measure. Parker expects a majority of the City Council to support the ordinance, but Riggle hopes a dramatic expression of vocal public opposition at Sunday's rally might sway some fence-sitters on the 16-member board.

If it does not and the ordinance passes, opponents are preparing to gather enough voter signatures to put a citizens' initiative on the November ballot to repeal what Riggle calls an "unequal rights amendment."