

Delray council backs benefits for same-sex couples

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By Dianna Smith

DELRAY BEACH — Although City Manager David Harden believes the city should not offer benefit packages to domestic partners of city employees because it would devalue marriage, the majority of the commission believes he is wrong.

Three of the five commissioners Tuesday revealed their support of a request from the Palm Beach County Human Rights Council to offer benefit packages to partners, homosexual or heterosexual, married or not.

Mayor Jeff Perlman said this will send a message that everyone is welcome in Delray Beach.

Commissioner Brenda Montague said "we need to get them to the 21st century," and Commissioner Jon Levinson called it business savvy.

"This is about competition and the right thing to do," Levinson said.

Vice Mayor Rita Ellis and Commissioner Fred Fetzer said they would not support the request. Both stressed they are not discriminating against anyone. A formal vote is expected this month.

Those who qualify for the benefit package would have to prove they are domestic partners.

Rand Hoch, founder of the local human rights council, estimates at least a dozen of the city's 804 full-time employees would qualify for the benefits. The national organization fights to end discrimination against gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender individuals.

Harden sent a memo to commissioners suggesting not to support the request because extending family benefits to domestic partners "devalues marriage." Harden, who keeps a Bible on his desk, also provided them an article about gay men and their health care providers, and another comparing lifestyles of homosexual couples to married couples.

Charles Yeamans, 71, of Delray Beach, and his partner, James Murphy, were together 50 years before Murphy died in 2004. Yeamans wrote a letter to the city in support of the request because he said one doesn't have to be married to be a family.

"All of my life, that's what I've been doing," Yeamans said of his fight for gay rights, "and at the same time wondering why in the hell people get so upset for people living a life with someone they love" but aren't married to.

Matt Foreman, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, said city governments including those in New York and Chicago, as well as the majority of the Fortune 500 companies, offer benefits to domestic partners as business strategies.

Hoch said 24 public employers in Florida offer benefits to domestic partners, including the Palm Beach County Property Appraiser, the Palm Beach County Sheriff's Office and the Palm Beach County School District. Same sex couples cannot marry in Florida.