



## Domestic partners bill wins final approval in Oregon

May 2, 2007

By BRAD CAIN Associated Press Writer

SALEM, Ore. (AP) - A bill giving Oregon's gay and lesbian couples the benefits of marriage through domestic partnerships won final legislative approval Wednesday.

The Senate endorsed the measure 21-9, sending it to Gov. Ted Kulongoski. The governor is a gay-rights supporter who says he will sign the bill along with another one passed last month to ban discrimination based on sexual orientation.

The domestic partnership bill, set to take effect Jan. 1, would enable same-sex couples to enter into contractual relationships that grant them the same benefits that state law offers to married couples.

The measure won unanimous endorsement from the Senate's majority Democrats, with Republican Sens. Frank Morse of Albany and Dave Nelson of Pendleton joining them in voting "yes."

When Kulongoski signs the measure, Oregon will join Vermont, Connecticut, California, New Jersey, Maine and Washington state in offering civil unions or domestic partnerships to same-sex couples.

Massachusetts allows gay couples to marry. The New Hampshire Legislature last week approved a civil unions measure that's expected to be signed into law soon, and Hawaii extends certain spousal rights to same-sex couples, along with cohabiting heterosexual pairs.

Oregon's domestic partnerships measure covers benefits relating to inheritance rights, child-rearing and custody, joint tax filings, joint health, auto and homeowners insurance policies, visitation rights at hospitals and others. It does not affect federal benefits for married couples including Social Security and joint filing of federal tax returns.

Still, backers said the bill would provide dignity and protection under state law for thousands of same-sex couples in Oregon who are in committed relationships that currently are not recognized by the state.

"This is a giant step forward for gays and lesbians in Oregon," said Senate Majority Leader Kate Brown, a Portland Democrat who is married but also considers herself a bisexual.

The bill produced a lengthy and at times acrimonious debate when it was considered in the House. Opponents there called domestic partnerships "marriage by another name," and said the bill violates the will of voters who endorsed a constitutional ban on gay marriage in 2004.

Wednesday's Senate debate was more muted, with only Sen. Roger Beyer, R-Molalla, speaking against the legislation, largely on technical grounds.

After the vote was taken, about 60 jubilant gay rights supporters gathered in a nearby room, where they toasted their victory with sparkling cider. Some of them shed tears of joy.

"The fact of the matter is, the state now recognizes us," said Kevin Bailey-Gilliam, who came to the Capitol with his partner, Alex, for Wednesday's vote. The two were among 3,000 same-sex couples who were granted marriage licenses in Multnomah County in 2004 before the Oregon Supreme Court stepped in the following year and nullified the licenses as unconstitutional.

In 2005, the Democratic-controlled Senate passed legislation that provided marriage benefits for same-sex couples, but Republicans who controlled the House at the time refused to let the issue come to a vote.

The results of last November's election cleared the way for the domestic partnership bill, as Democrats regained control of the House and kept their Senate majority.

**Wednesday's vote was hailed by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, based in New York.**

**"With this family recognition law and the new nondiscrimination law passed last month, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Oregonians will have - at long last - laid the foundation for full equality," the group said.**

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The domestic partnerships measure is HB2007. The anti-discrimination measure is SB2