

News analysis: San Diego Mayor Embraces Same-Sex Marriage

Councilmember Atkins: 'I was stunned speechless'

by Rex Wockner
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Republican San Diego Mayor Jerry Sanders abruptly changed his position on gay marriage Sept. 19, announced that his daughter is a lesbian, and signed a City Council resolution adding San Diego to a friend-of-the-court brief that urges the California Supreme Court to legalize same-sex marriage.

The court is expected to rule on a same-sex marriage case early next year.

"Two years ago, I believed that civil unions were a fair alternative," Sanders said. "Those beliefs, in my case, have changed. The concept of a 'separate but equal' institution is not something I can support.

"I have close family members and friends who are a member of the gay and lesbian community," Sanders continued, fighting back tears. "Those folks include my daughter Lisa, as well as members of my personal staff. I want for them the same thing that we all want for our loved ones—for each of them to find a mate whom they love deeply and who loves them back; someone with whom they can grow old together and share life's experiences.

"In the end," the mayor said, "I couldn't look any of them in the face and tell them that their relationship—their very lives—were any less meaningful than the marriage I share with my wife Rana."

Very few San Diegans, gay or straight, knew that Sanders' daughter Lisa, 24, is gay, and she has declined all requests for interviews since the big announcement. This reporter did, however, snag a moment with her Sept. 20 at the kickoff event for Mayor Sanders' re-election campaign.

"I'm just very proud of my father," Lisa Sanders said. "And to be a part of this. It's about equality, and he's doing the right thing, and I'm very confident in him."

Openly lesbian City Councilmember Toni Atkins, who steered the resolution through the council, was ecstatic at Sanders' startling about-face, especially given that he had announced just a day earlier that he would veto the measure.

"I thought we were going to have to go through a veto override, and that would have been tough," Atkins said in an interview. "We'd have had to hurry, as we would have been on a very tight timeline. The fact that he did this—it stopped me in my tracks in the most pleasant way.

"We're not used to that in politics," Atkins said. "We're used to being stopped in our tracks and it's not pleasant. My focus was go go go, and let's get this done, and let's not give an inch—and so, to get that statement from the mayor, I was stunned.

“All I could do was look at him [when he told me] . It seemed like for infinity. You’d expect a profound word to come out of my mouth, but when I finally did speak, all I said was, ‘Wow!’

“I was bowled over and I hugged him.”

Atkins said the mayor’s office has received a lot of positive e-mail and flowers of thanks.

“I know he’s getting some pushback from the other side as well,” she said. “But I believe it’s more positive than negative at this point.”

Indeed, at the Sept. 20 campaign-kickoff event, Sanders received applause and cheers when he said: “I wanted my family up here [onstage with me] because over the last couple of years their family life has changed fairly dramatically. Some more than others. Some in the last day or so.”

RISKY POLITICS?

It remains to be seen whether Sanders’ championing of same-sex marriage will affect his fortunes in next June’s nonpartisan primary election. Analysts say he may lose some votes from right-wing Republicans, while, at the same time, picking up support from liberals and the city’s sizable gay community, where he already was well-liked. The city’s weekly gay newspaper named him and Police Chief William Lansdowne “Persons of the Year” in 2006.

One likely Republican candidate, Steve Francis—who finished 3.5 percentage points behind Sanders in the June 2005 primary—would run to the right of Sanders, but even he supports same-sex civil unions. Possible Democratic candidate Denise Duchenev, who is now a state senator, supports same-sex marriage and is politically to the left of Sanders.

In one scenario, Sanders’ support for gay marriage could push some percentage of conservatives toward Francis while Duchenev could draw much of the liberal vote, leaving Sanders squeezed in the middle. In San Diego’s nonpartisan primary, if no candidate gets 50 percent of the vote, the top two vote-getters advance to a runoff election.

San Diego has 224,397 registered Democratic voters, 190,647 registered Republican voters, 141,090 registered voters who “decline to state” a political affiliation, and 27,000 voters registered with minor parties.

Still, Republican Sanders captured 53.6 percent of the vote when he was elected, beating maverick, left-wing Democrat Donna Frye, who got 46.1 percent of the vote. Frye is currently a city councilmember.

Sanders’ gay-marriage position also might make no difference at all. San Diego is no longer the conservative city it once was. The nation’s eighth-largest city has a lesbian city councilmember and a lesbian state senator. The fire chief is a lesbian. The Republican district attorney is a lesbian. Two superior court judges are gay. Mayor Sanders’ press secretary is a gay man. So is his deputy press secretary.

As the alternative weekly CityBeat newspaper put it in a July 18 article, “Forget ‘Don’t ask, don’t tell.’ In millennial San Diego, the motto these days is, ‘Who knows, who cares?’”

Sanders’ tearful speech in which he embraced gay marriage and outed his daughter (video at tinyurl.com/2wa5a3) made national news, and made the head of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force cry.

“Sanders’ emotional statement brought me—and I know millions of other gay and lesbian people—to tears,” said Executive Director Matt Foreman. “Mayor Sanders will go into the history books as a profile in courage and conviction.”

If that’s how San Diego voters see it as well, Sanders’ decision “to lead with my heart ... to do what I think is right and to take a stand on behalf of equality and social justice” may turn out to have been a good political move as well.