

The proxy war

By Ron Cunningham
Sun editorial page editor
Sunday, February 22, 2009 at 6:01 a.m.

By and large, city elections tend to be strictly local affairs. But indications are that the upcoming March 24 election will be a political proxy war, with implications that range far beyond Gainesville's corporate limits.

Sort of like back in the Cold War, when the U.S. and the old Soviet Union would pick out a small country to duke it out in. That way, each side could test the other's resolve and vulnerabilities without things getting totally out of hand.

On today's oped page are dueling guest columns regarding the upcoming vote on proposed Gainesville Amendment 1, which would restrict the city to enforcing only those anti-discrimination provisions explicitly provided for in state law.

On the "vote yes" side is Mark Minck, chair of Citizens for Good Public Policy, which led the petition initiative that got Amendment 1 on the ballot.

On the "vote no" side is City Commissioner Graig Lowe, a longtime human rights activist in Gainesville.

We're going to be hearing a lot about Amendment 1 in the coming days and weeks. And these "point-counterpoint" pieces offer a good jumping-off point for voters to begin to educate themselves on what is easily the most volatile issue ever to appear on a city ballot.

Obviously, Minck and Lowe don't agree on much. But you don't have to read very closely between the lines of each essay to get the idea that both sides think the other is getting a lot of undue outside help.

The campaign to defeat Amendment 1, writes Minck, "is more about out-of-state special interests trying to assert control over Gainesville than it is about helping out town."

He cites financial contributions from the **National Gay and Lesbian Task Force**, the Human Rights Campaign and Basic Rights Montgomery, in Silver Spring, Md., to Equality is Gainesville's Business," the political action committee formed to oppose Amendment 1.

For his part, Lowe contends that Amendment 1 was "drafted by a Michigan group that would take away Gainesville's local power to establish our own equal opportunity laws."

Lowe is referring to the Ann Arbor-based Thomas More Law Center, which is acting as "legal counsel" for Citizens for Good Public Policy."

"The Thomas More Law Center has teamed up with the Florida Family Association and is working closely with Citizens for Good Public Policy," says a press release posted on the conservative legal center's Web site. "The Christian Coalition of Florida is also helping the effort."

Who are all of these out-of-towners? And why do they care about what's going on in little old Gainesville?

Usually the Gators have to win a national championship for Hogtown to get this kind of attention.

Dan Smith, UF political science professor who has done extensive research on ballot initiatives, says: "This is typical in terms of initiative politics. What we are seeing is Gainesville being on the front lines of a national debate over gay and lesbian issues. We've become a national focal point for both the right and the left."

If Amendment 1 passes, Smith says, "it sends a signal to the right that protection for gays and lesbians are up for grabs, even in little, liberal Gainesville.

"If they can overturn protections for gays and lesbians here, it can happen anywhere. And the left certainly sees that possibility as well."

Both sides "are looking for test cases."

Smith predicts, "We are going to see by far the most expensive campaign waged for and against a ballot measure ever in Gainesville, I am convinced."

On the plus side, the presence of Amendment 1 on the ballot, coupled with the involvement of so many interest groups, should certainly stimulate city voter turnout beyond the usual anemic 10-20 percent range.

"We're not going to have a normal 20 percent turnout," Smith says. "Controversial ballot measures usually increase turnout."

The question is, just who will turn out?

In her "State of the City" address last month, Mayor Pegeen Hanrahan noted that 58 percent of Gainesville voters opposed state constitutional Amendment 2, which prohibits gay marriage in Florida. This, despite the fact that Amendment 2 was approved by the majority of Florida and Alachua County voters.

Hanrahan and other opponents are hoping that Gainesville voters will similarly reject Amendment 1.

"Gainesville is not a place that always conforms to conventional wisdom or follows the easy path or popular view," the mayor said. "Some may consider this quirky, or the inevitable burden of a college town. To me, it is an indicator of a visionary citizenry."

On the other hand, it might just be an indicator that a lot of left-leaning UF students, who showed up primarily to vote for Barack Obama, also took the occasion to register their opposition to the anti-gay marriage amendment.

But students are notoriously AWOL when it comes to participating in city elections. And, indeed, the student vote might not have been as significant as it was in November without extraordinary turnout efforts from the Obama campaign.

In the general election, students were being bused to the polls en masse for early voting. "The big question," Smith says, "is whether we going to see that kind of" turnout effort mounted by the anti-Amendment 1 forces. "Traditionally, students don't turn out ever" for city elections.

On the other hand, Amendment 1 proponents will certainly focus their resources on trying to stimulate a large conservative turnout on election day; working the churches and the African-American community. Ironically, many of the same black voters who helped Obama carry Florida, also helped pass the marriage amendment, even though Obama was on record opposing Amendment 2.

However it turns out, it's clear that the celebrations and lamentations won't be confined to just downtown Gainesville on election night. Depending on the results, there will be champaign glasses clinking, or hands-ringing, from Tallahassee to D.C. to Michigan.

Because for the next several weeks, Gainesville is ground zero in a much larger ideological and cultural proxy war.