

Gay weddings debated

Moral objections: Cake bakers, photographers could refuse to offer their services.

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Staff Report

CONCORD — Representatives of religious and civil rights groups railed against a bill that would allow people to refuse to provide services such as photography or catering for a same-sex marriage if they have a moral or religious objection.

House Bill 1264, debated at a Judiciary Committee hearing on Tuesday, would allow a business owner or employee to decline to provide wedding services if “providing such services ... would be a violation of the person’s conscience or religious faith.”

The bill would also exempt such a person from legal action brought because of the refusal of service.

Under New Hampshire's gay marriage law, churches and religious groups are already exempt from having to officiate at gay marriages or provide services for them.

Rep. Frank Sapareto, R-Derry, one of HB 1264’s sponsors, said it was an extension of the exemption afforded to clergy.

“No one should be forced to go against their heartfelt be-liefs,” he said. “So we’re now going to hold a gun against a shop owner’s head because he won’t bake a cake for a gay person?”

Representatives of the Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays and New Hampshire Civil Liberties Union spoke against the bill.

“This will lead to bigotry and discrimination,” said Roberta Barry of PFLAG. “It appears to legislate that you can pick and choose what laws to follow based on your conscience ... Where does it stop? Will we be able to one day say, ‘It’s against my conscience to pay

property taxes?’” Other opponents of the legislation likened it to Nazi-era laws and the Jim Crow South.

“The bill goes against the core tenets of civil rights in this country,” said Bridget Hansel, a vestry member at St. James Episcopal Church in Keene. “The Civil Rights Act ended unequal application of the law in the workplace and facilities.”

The Roman Catholic Diocese of Manchester, meanwhile, supports the bill.

Other proponents insisted that the bill concerns only marriage, not any wider discrimination against homosexuals.

“As a photographer, I should be able to select who I want to be employed by,” a man named Kurt Whelper told the panel.

“So we’re now going to hold a gun against a shop owner’s head because he won’t bake a cake for a gay person?”

*REP. FRANK SAPARETO
R-Derry*