

Iowa Politics Roundup: Gay-Marriage Amendment Passes in Iowa House

Written by Lynn Campbell
Friday, 04 February 2011 14:47

Several Democrats became emotional and at least two were moved to tears on the Iowa House floor as they argued against a proposed constitutional amendment that would ban gay marriage, civil unions, and domestic partnerships, but the Iowa House went on to approve it on a 62-37 vote February 1 after a three-hour debate.

“This decision will spur hatred, and that hurts,” said Representative Phyllis Thede (D-Bettendorf), her voice filled with emotion. “All of you here in some form are initiating hatred; that is not your intention but you are initiating it. ... What you’re doing today, it only hurts you. It does nothing for anyone else.”

Representative Beth Wessel-Kroeschell (D-Ames) urged the House not to label same-sex couples as second-class citizens. She said that House Joint Resolution 6 is extreme, and that only two states have approved amendments as restrictive. She argued that marriage is a basic civil right. And she said that gay and lesbian couples have been some of Iowa’s best foster parents.

“Even though the idea of marriage equality may be upsetting to some, we need to remember that family and commitment is an important value to all Iowans,” she said. “Marriage says ‘We’re a family’ like nothing else. Never have we taken away a right in the constitution. Never. We have added and expanded rights. We have never removed rights.”

But Representative Dwayne Alons (R-Hull), the bill’s floor manager, said the people of Iowa spoke convincingly in November when they ousted three Iowa Supreme Court justices who were part of the unanimous decision legalizing same-sex marriage. “A groundswell of support for traditional marriage has arisen,” Alons said. “People all across Iowa are saying, ‘Let us vote!’”

“This is not a debate about taking away a right from anyone,” said Representative Greg Forristall (R-Macedonia). “This is a debate about whether a right exists.”

Three Democrats – state Reps. Dan Muhlbauer of Manilla, Brian Quirk of New Hampton, and Kurt Swaim of Bloomfield – joined Republicans in voting for the marriage amendment, while

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Republican state Representative Betty De Boef of What Cheer was absent for the vote.

House Takes Stand Against Health-Care Mandate

In a week that saw a federal judge in Florida rule against the federal health-care-reform bill, the Republican-controlled Iowa House took a stand of its own against the individual mandate that requires individuals to purchase health insurance.

The House voted 59-39 for House File 111, which asserts the state's rights under the 10th Amendment to maintain control over health insurance. The bill would prevent Iowans from being forced to purchase health insurance as required under federal health-care reform.

"It is our position that they took away a right from individuals and the state of Iowa when they passed the Obama health care," said Representative Lance Horbach (R-Tama), an insurance agent. "This is just restating what we thought we had as Iowans ... the ability to determine our own commerce selection. They took that away from us."

Representative Chuck Soderberg (R-Le Mars) said federal health-care reform has expansive mandates and penalties, presents a serious threat to business, and creates a debt burden. "The last thing we want to do is lose more jobs," he said.

But Representative Lisa Heddens (D-Ames) claimed that the Iowa legislature has no authority to circumvent federal law. "I'm not sure that putting a statement in the Iowa Code is the right thing to do," she said.

Representative Mark Smith (D-Marshalltown) said the legislation was not well-thought-out and could affect things such as eligibility for Medicare. "This goes much further and goes to all laws," he said. "I do have grave concerns about what we are doing here today. ... If this is a statement, it's an unnecessary piece of legislation."

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House File 111 is modeled after similar legislation adopted by Virginia in 2009 that served as the basis for that state's court challenge to federal health-care reform. Horbach acknowledged that the issue will ultimately be determined by the U.S. Supreme Court.

Bill to End Live Greyhound Racing Advances in Senate

A bill that would end live greyhound racing at Iowa's dog racetracks while bringing the state millions of dollars in revenue cleared its first legislative hurdle Thursday.

A Senate subcommittee agreed to move forward with Senate Study Bill 1064, which would allow parimutuel dog racetracks to end live dog races and continue parimutuel wagering on telecast dog races if they pay an annual "dog racetrack licensure fee."

But subcommittee member Senator Jack Hatch (D-Des Moines) said he won't support the bill unless it requires Iowa's two casino racetracks to make annual combined payments of \$10 million indefinitely.

Under the current bill, Mystique – formerly called the Dubuque Greyhound Park & Casino – would pay \$3 million each January starting in 2012 and continuing for seven years. Bluffs Run Greyhound Park in Council Bluffs would pay \$7 million each January starting in 2012 and continuing for seven years.

The bill would create a greyhound owners and kennels retirement fund under the control of the Iowa Racing & Gaming Commission, which advocates say would create a "soft landing" for greyhound owners and kennels. Dog breeders have said that ending live racing would result in 1,500 lost jobs at 150 greyhound farms across the state.

Income-Tax Cut Advances in House

Iowa would reduce all nine brackets of its individual income tax by about 20 percent under a bill

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that cleared the House Ways & Means Committee on a 19-5 vote Wednesday night.

Four committee Democrats – Representatives Dave Jacoby of Coralville, Anesa Kajtazovic of Waterloo, Brian Quirk of New Hampton, and Roger Thomas of Elkader – joined Republicans in voting in favor of the bill.

Iowa's current individual income-tax rates range from 0.36 percent to 8.98 percent. Under House File 4, these rates would change to a low of 0.28 percent and a high of 7.18 percent. The bill would take effect January 1, 2012, and apply to tax years beginning on or after that date.

The impact to the state budget is estimated at \$204 million in Fiscal Year 2012 and \$704 million in Fiscal Year 2013.

An effort by Representative Dave Jacoby (D-Coralville) to reduce the tax cut for the wealthiest and poorest Iowans – and increase the tax break for the middle class – failed on a 14-10 vote.

Republicans said the amendment would have taken tax relief away from small businesses that need the state's help. "A very high percentage of businesses actually file as individual income taxpayers," said House Ways & Means Chair Thomas Sands (R-Wapello). "So this does help create jobs; there's no doubt about that."

Representative Janet Petersen (D-Des Moines) questioned how the state can afford this income-tax break at the same time that it's proposing elimination of the state-funded preschool program and a zero-percent allowable growth for schools over the next two years.

Pawlenty Urgest Fiscal Responsibility

Former Minnesota Governor Tim Pawlenty still has not made a decision on whether he will run for president in 2012, but made several suggestions for the Obama administration in a speech in West Des Moines.

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“We need to hold our leaders accountable for living within their means just like you have to do every day,” Pawlenty said while speaking at the Waukee Area Chamber of Commerce annual dinner. “[We need to] make sure we have a cost structure in our country that is competitive and improving, not uncompetitive and getting worse.”

Pawlenty sharply criticized the Obama government for overspending and the health-care plan. He also emphasized the importance of creating jobs here in the United States.

“It’s real tough to be pro-job and anti-business as a policymaker,” he said. “That’s like being pro-egg and anti-chicken.”

Pawlenty garnered applause from the crowd after saying: “We can’t spend more than we take in. You know it in your business, you know it in your families; we just have to make the government follow the same principle. It is not that hard.”

On the new U.S. health-care system, Pawlenty predicted: “That is a system that I guarantee you will be in trouble within 15 years or sooner.”

Pawlenty pointed to the success Minnesota had with mild health-care changes for its state employees while he was governor, and also spoke about reducing the deficit in the state.

This was Pawlenty’s seventh visit to Iowa in the past 15 months. He repeated to reporters that he will most likely reach a decision by March or April. He has already formed both national and Iowa political action committees, Freedom First PAC.

This weekly summary comes from IowaPolitics.com, an online government and politics news service.