

State Senate approves gay-rights bill

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The 18-year odyssey of gay-rights legislation in Connecticut came to a triumphant end Wednesday as the Senate voted 21-14 to approve a bill prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation.

Gov. Lowell P. Weicker Jr. said he intends to sign the bill into law and make Connecticut the fourth state to enact some form of gay rights, after Wisconsin, Massachusetts and Hawaii.

The House approved the bill last week, 81-65.

"I think this is perhaps the best news for tolerance that we'll see in the country this year," said Rep. Joseph S. Grabarz Jr., D-Bridgeport, who reported getting death threats after coming out in December as the state's first openly gay lawmaker.

Supporters of the bill jumped to their feet in the visitors' gallery and applauded when the vote was announced at 3:51 p.m. after a 50-minute debate. A handful of opponents sat in silence.

Throughout the chamber and gallery there were lawmakers and on-lookers who considered passage a personal victory.

Sen. Anthony V. Avallone, D-New Haven, who voted against gay rights as a freshman legislator in 1983 and then became one of its champions as a co-chairman of the judiciary committee, was congratulated by the other co-chairman, Rep. Richard D. Tulisano, D-Rocky Hill.

Grabarz stood in the back of the chamber. Rep. Nancy Wyman, D-Tolland, one of the House members

who came to watch the vote in the upper chamber, embraced him. In the gallery sat his mother, Gloria, and brother Peter.

"This is the biggest day of my life," Gloria Grabarz said. "Maybe people won't be so ignorant and will understand people with other ways."

Also in the gallery was Leslie J. Brett, chairwoman of the Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities, the state agency that now will be authorized to investigate discrimination based on sexual orientation. She came out as a lesbian last

week in a letter urging lawmakers to pass the bill.

Nearby was Betty Hudson of Madison, a former state senator who championed gay rights in 1975, the year a gay-rights bill was approved by the Senate only to be rejected by the House.

"This is the last piece of the reformist agenda from the '70s to get through," Hudson said. "When the Senate passed it in 1975, we were the first legislative chamber in the na-

Please see Senate, Page C9

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Senate approves gay-rights legislation

Continued from Connecticut Page

tion to approve gay rights."

Hudson said she never dreamed the effort would take so long. Gay-rights legislation was first introduced in Connecticut in 1973.

The 1991 bill prohibits, under most circumstances, discrimination in employment, housing, public accommodations, issuance of state licenses and granting of contracts.

It also prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation by professional associations and organizations whose members are licensed by the state and by people who have contracts with the state.

Sexual orientation is defined as having a preference or being identified as having a preference for heterosexuality, homosexuality or bisexuality.

Tulisano and Avallone drew the bill more narrowly than in past years to broaden its appeal and neutralize objections from church

groups, including the Roman Catholic Church.

Exempt from the bill are religious organizations and the Reserve Officers' Training Corps.

The bill also has a number of disclaimers: It does not mean the state condones homosexuality, nor does it authorize marriages between members of the same sex or require adoption agencies to place children with gays.

Opponents said that supporters of the legislation never proved that discrimination against gays and lesbians was pervasive enough to warrant a gay-rights law.

"We are not passing legislation to stop discrimination," said Sen. Louis C. DeLuca, R-Woodbury. "We are passing legislation to approve a lifestyle."

Opponents nearly succeeded in sending the bill back to the House by offering an amendment that was defeated 18-17. The amendment would

have required people who file discrimination complaints to pay legal fees for the accused if the complaints are determined to be unfounded.

Avallone said such a requirement would have a "chilling effect" on people wishing to exercise their rights under all of the state's anti-discrimination laws.

The Commission on Human Rights and Opportunities estimates that a gay-rights law would lead to a 2 percent increase, about 30 cases, in the agency's annual caseload.