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House and Senate pass marriage bill; bill goes to governor

Below: Video of Rep. Harris, Speaker Madigan press conference following SB10 vote

by Matt Simonette

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Loud cheers erupted through the state capitol today as the Illinois House voted 61-54 to enact the Religious Freedom and Marriage Equality Act, which could make Illinois the 15th state to get same-sex marriage equality.

Marriages can begin June 1, 2014.

State Rep. Greg Harris made good on a promise he made last spring, to return in a veto session and to call for a vote. Rumors spread throughout the Capitol that the vote might happen Tuesday afternoon—Harris had filed an amendment early in the day that would address timing complications about SB10's effective date, which to many signaled that he was ready.

Before the vote was called, Harris said that the political landscape had changed since the spring, given the U.S. Supreme Court's decision striking many of the tenets of the Defense of Marriage Act.

Since the decision came down, Harris said, LGBT Illinoisans had moved "from a second class to a third class status," since marriage rights were now available in the eyes of the federal government. If couples get married out of the state "they lose rights when they return to Illinois," Harris said.

Many opponents of SB10 said it would result in religious organizations and institutions being forced to sanctify and affirm same-sex marriages. But Harris reminded the body that many religious institutions were eager to see marriage equality enacted.

"This legislation respects that point of view," Harris said.

"I am very happy and proud that this bill is up for a vote," said Rep. Ken Dunkin, who chairs the House Black Caucus. "I'm excited to see members take up this discussion for this bill...that would probably make us one of the most progressive states in this country."

"You know and I know that this is the right thing to do," Dunkin added.

Rep. Ann Williams said that she had been moved by multiple postcards she'd received from supporters that cited one word, "love," as the reason they supported gay marriage. "It's not often we get to discuss love on this floor," she added.

"I can't wait to push that green button," Williams said. "...I believe that this will be the

most important vote that I take."

Out Rep. Sam Yingling called the issue a matter of "family values," reminding that religious institutions "have massive protections under this bill." He said nobody in the chamber could realistically fall back on religious liberties as a reason to reject SB10. Yingling added that his constituents sent him to Springfield to represent both them and what is right for families across Illinois. "There are LGBT families in every county in this state."

Rep. Kelly Cassidy mentioned the personal stakes involved, adding that her sons have frequently faced obtrusive questions about their family, both on the playground and in the Capitol. Challenging her colleagues to pass the vote, she asked them to think of future generations.

"It is their opinion of your actions today that really matters ...You will never remember doing the right thing," Cassidy said.

Thanking Harris, Cassidy, Yingling and Ald. Deb Mell, Rep. Sara Feigenholtz said, "Equality is something we must stand up for...separate but equal is not equal. ...I know many great couples whose marriages have clearly outlasted mine."

Legislators opposed to the bill largely zeroed in the bill's address of religious freedoms, though Harris' amendment affirmed even further that religious institutions and other organizations would not be required to any way affirm same-sex marriages.

Rep. Jeanne Ives called SB10 "the worst bill in the nation" in terms of protecting religious liberties. Additionally, she said SB10 would lead to explicit sex education in schools. Rep. Thomas Morrison said it would lead to a legitimization of polyamory.

Rep. Mary Flowers rejected the correlation between civil rights and LGBT rights many supporters drew. "This is not the issue I came down here to debate. ...This debate is a joke. What you want is for the federal government to give to you."

Many prominent supporters of marriage equality gathered for the vote. Mell and Illinois Comptroller Judy Barr Topinka were among prominent supporters who were sitting on the floor as the bill was debated. House Speaker Michael Madigan sat next to Mell for much of the session.

The Senate promptly passed the amended bill 32-21, and Gov. Quinn has said he would sign the legislation.

The governor was not expected to sign the bill immediately, and a special ceremony will likely be held, similar to when civil unions legislation was signed into law.

John Kohlhepp, campaign manager for Illinois Unites for Marriage, said, "Tonight, Illinois legislators made history....They can say for decades that they were part of

history."

James Bennett of Lambda Legal said that the lawsuit his organization filed along with ACLU Illinois is now moot.

"Thousands of Illinoisans contacted their legislators about this bill," Bennett said. "I think it's great that they were able to share their stories this way, and that it led to this. I think we're a better state because of it."

"Many people worked long and hard to make marriage equality a reality for Illinois," said Kevin Boyer, one of the 13 co-chairs of the March on Springfield. "We're proud that the March helped provide months of needed energy and momentum going into the veto session. The March brought to Springfield an incredibly diverse statewide coalition of LGBT people, allies and organizations. The message of love, family, faith and equality was strong and life-affirming. We're told that our work made a difference and for that we thank not only our founder, (Windy City Times Publisher) Tracy Baim, but the thousands of Illinoisans who made it happen."

Statement by President Barack Obama on Marriage Equality in Illinois

Tonight, I applaud the men and women of the Illinois General Assembly, a body in which I was proud to serve, for voting to legalize marriage equality in my home state.

As President, I have always believed that gay and lesbian Americans should be treated fairly and equally under the law. Over time, I also came to believe that same-sex couples should be able to get married like anyone else. So tonight, Michelle and I are overjoyed for all the committed couples in Illinois whose love will now be as legal as ours — and for their friends and family who have long wanted nothing more than to see their loved ones treated fairly and equally under the law.

I also commend the members of the General Assembly for approaching this issue in a fair and open way, and for recognizing the importance of our commitment to religious freedom by engaging the religious community in this conversation. Throughout this debate, they've made it clear that this is about civil marriages and civil laws, and made sure that churches and other institutions of faith are still free to make their own decisions that conform to their own teachings.

As I said in my Inaugural Address last January, our journey as a nation is not complete until our gay brothers and sisters are treated like anyone else under the law, for if we are truly created equal, then surely the love we commit to one another must be equal as well. And tonight, I'm so proud that the men and women elected to serve the people of the great state of Illinois have chosen to take us one step further on that journey to perfect our union.

(<http://www.windycitymediagroup.com/lgbt/House-and-Senate-pass-marriage-bill-bill-goes-to-governor-/45024.html>)