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Gay rights vs. 'family values' over same-sex marriage

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The state's largest gay-rights group, Equality Virginia, and a prominent "traditional values" organization, the Family Foundation of Virginia, have squared off in a legislative debate over same-sex marriage.

By Thomas Gehring
Capital News Service

RICHMOND -- The state's largest gay-rights group, Equality Virginia, and a prominent "traditional values" organization, the Family Foundation of Virginia, have squared off in a legislative debate over same-sex marriage.

The Family Foundation wants to amend the state Constitution to define marriage as between a man and a woman - and to ensure that Virginia won't recognize same-sex unions.

"The national elections in November were a clear statement by the American people that traditional values and traditional marriage matter," said Victoria Cobb, the group's executive director.

Equality Virginia has mobilized against the proposed constitutional amendment. During last week's Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Lobby Day at the Capitol, more than 200 gay-rights supporters turned out to voice their concerns to their legislators.

"We know we'll win; it will just take some time," said Dyana Mason, Equality Virginia's executive director.

Gay-rights advocates' goals for the session include:

- Defeating the proposed amendment to the Virginia Constitution. The amendment, which requires approval by the General Assembly and by voters, "provides that marriage may exist only between a man and woman and that nothing in the Constitution shall be interpreted to require the Commonwealth to recognize or permit same-sex marriages."
- Repealing last year's House Bill 751 (titled the Affirmation of Marriage Act), which prohibits same-sex

couples from entering into contracts "purporting to bestow the privileges or obligations of marriage."

- Repealing Virginia's "Crimes Against Nature" law, which was ruled unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court in 2003.
- Granting private corporations the right to allow domestic partnership benefits. Virginia is currently the only state in the country that doesn't do so.

"We believe that the Marriage Affirmation Act, a huge backwards step for Virginia, should be repealed," Mason said during Thursday's packed press conference. "And we believe that the Virginia Constitution should never be the place to codify discrimination."

Several religious leaders, including the Rev. Kharma Amos of the Metropolitan Community Church of Northern Virginia, agreed.

"It is unfortunate that the lines separating church and state on the issue of marriage have become so blurred," Amos said.

"Even if the government were to grant civil marriage equality, by whatever name, no church or religious community could ever be forced or required to recognize or bless any relationship that went against its beliefs."

The Family Foundation is pushing hard for the marriage amendment. The organization fears that otherwise, "activist courts" will force Virginia to recognize same-sex marriages.

"Virginia has done all it can to protect marriage, but any activist court or judge can at any time impose same-sex marriage on the Commonwealth," Cobb said. "Americans simply do not support the notion of same-sex marriage."

Delegate John Cosgrove, R-Chesapeake, is sponsoring the proposed constitutional amendment, House Joint Resolution 528. He said he filed the paperwork in July, before voters in 11 states passed similar legislation during the November elections.

Cosgrove said an amendment is necessary because "liberal courts" could find Virginia's Affirmation of Marriage Act unconstitutional.

"Marriage is simply too important to leave to liberal activist judges," Cosgrove said.

Note: Thomas Gehring is a student in the School of Mass Communications at Virginia Commonwealth University, which operates [Capital News Service](#).

Links

Equality Virginia:

<http://www.equalityvirginia.org>

Family Foundation of Virginia:

<http://www.familyfoundation.org/>



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