

STATE AND LOCAL

Gay rights up for Houston vote

By MICHAEL CRAWFORD
Staff Writer

When the more than 7,000 students at Texas A&M from Harris County returned to school, they left that county's largest city in a fierce battle of rhetoric which could indirectly affect Gay Student Services acceptance at Texas A&M.

A Jan. 19 Houston referendum that, if approved, would outlaw discrimination against homosexuals in city employment has ignited widespread debate among government, religious and civic leaders.

It is an issue proponents on both sides regret being forced to a referendum.

The proposed changes would amend the city's civil service and affirmative action practices to include the term "sexual orientation." Currently, "race, color, age, disability, sex or national origin" may not be considered for hiring, firing or job promotions.

Campus attention has been centered on the ongoing battle by the GSS to receive official recognition as a student organization at A&M. The Board of Regents has refused recognition so far.

Gay Student Services' President Marco Roberts believes the outcome of the Houston vote may set a trend of acceptance or rejection for homosexuals throughout Texas.

"Psychologists have noted that people seem to follow the lead of the laws that are written," Roberts said. "If this proposal does pass, people will probably become more tolerant...It works the other way around also. If it doesn't pass, then it will hurt gay rights' issues pretty much in all of Texas. It will suddenly become more popular to be anti-gay than pro-gay in terms of rights issues. If

this proposal fails, I don't know of any politician that will support any gay rights issues for a long time to come."

Absentee balloting, usually low in local elections, was reported surprisingly high with 3,606 ballots cast in person and another 753 by mail at the close of voting Tuesday. Experts generally agree a low turnout makes defeat less likely because of the Gay Political Caucus' ability to motivate its constituency.

Opponents of the referendum charge passage would grant minority status to homosexuals and legitimize their lifestyle. Houston Councilman John Goodner is the most vocal public official lobbying against the changes.

"I think there is a heck of a lot of difference in compassion, toleration and understanding of that difference (homosexuality)," he said, "than making that difference some sort of attractive alternative and giving it recognition."

Councilman Anthony Hall, who first proposed the changes, denies the amendments grant homosexuals recognition saying "traditional prejudices and misunderstandings" may cause voters to defeat the referendum.

"The opposition is putting out a host of untruths about the ordinance itself," Hall said. "They suggest that we are creating special privileges for homosexuals and that the city is going to have an expensive affirmative action program to pay for... The ordinances preclude any kind of recruitment or special privilege. They say that specifically."

Goodner, who is also Chairman of the anti-gay Committee for Public Awareness, does not deny distortion has occurred. "I think Councilman

Hall is accurate," Goodner said. "On an issue like this I think it's impossible for everyone to go around and tell the truth. I guess we all tell the truth as we see it. There have been some distortions of fact by, not only our people, but also, I'm sure, by a lot of other groups."

In December 1983, Hall presented the measure to council and asked the city's legal department to review the changes. In June 1984, the department returned them to council which narrowly passed the civil service ordinance and the affirmative action resolution — 9-6 and 8-7 respectively.

Goodner charged Hall sought the Gay Political Caucus' endorsement which other Council proponents had. Hall denied the charge saying, "I believe that in 1984 any citizen in this country who is not guilty of illegal conduct ought to have an equal opportunity for a job from his government."

Opponents were outraged, saying their views had not been heard by the Council and prompted a petition drive which resulted in 61,400 signatures. Rather than rescind the changes, the Council chose to place the issue before the voters at a cost of \$350,000. Leaders on both sides, armed with several political action committees, established phone banks and held meetings to promote voter interest.

In spending figures released Wednesday, anti-referendum forces outspent their opposition by three to one.

Rev. Bill Oliver, manager of the pro-gay Citizens for a United Houston, said the issue is not a gay issue but a discrimination issue.

"I'm opposed to injustice whether

it's in South Africa, Ethiopia or Central America," Oliver said. "Whatever it is, it affects all of us. The way this country is all about."

Oliver continued: "During the Civil Rights movement when we were to the nation, 'The issue is a question and people are equal, who Dr. Martin Luther King quoted the Declaration of Independence about we hold these truths to be self-evident that all men people are created equal, were we serious? Did we mean it?...I think many people who are gay or pro-gay are saying this is a discrimination issue; this is a question; it is a matter of equality under the law." Oliver believes discrimination against homosexuals is illegal to discrimination against blacks in the past.

Interim Director Bert Hurlbut of the Austin-based Foundation for Traditional Morality equates the referendum to an invitation to a San Francisco-type atmosphere.

"We must take action to protect homosexuals from giving blood, to control child handling operations, to get them out of jobs and professions that deal with the public, and specifically, we must require them to get out of food handling and medical professions."

In a statement released by Bishop Oliphant of the Texas Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, Rev. Frank C. Maybee, minister of the Coastal Plains Area of the Southwest (Disciples), and Bishop Maurice Benitez of the Episcopal Diocese of Texas, the religious leaders of the three major denominations urged support of the referendum.

Barbara Jordan supports gay rights ordinance

HOUSTON — Former U.S. Rep. Barbara Jordan will appear this week in television commercials supporting two Houston gay rights ordinances that will be considered by voters in a Saturday referendum election.

Officials of the Campaign for United Houston, a group campaigning for passage of two gay-rights ordinances, said Jordan has

endorsed their efforts and is taping television and radio commercials for the organization.

The commercials are part of a final push by the pro-gay group to garner support in Saturday's election. At issue are two propositions that would grant job protection and equality in hiring for everyone, regardless of "sexual orientation."

Campaign activity against the is-

sue also has intensified. Anti-gay groups have brought in a physician from California and a rabbi from New York to speak at rallies and meetings against the ordinances.

City councilman John Goodner, a leader of the anti-gay rights group, said the issue in the election is not job discrimination, but whether Houstonians want to transform their city into a haven for homosexuals.

Absentee voting on the issue due Tuesday with a total of 3,606 ballots cast. Another 753 absentee ballots have been mailed and not yet returned.

The Houston Post quoted city officials as saying the absentee vote is unusually high and may indicate that the overall turnout may be greater than the original projection of 6 percent to 8 percent.

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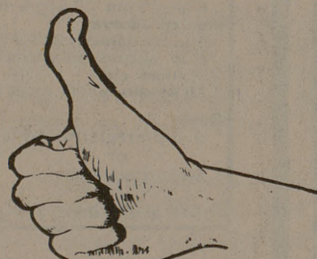
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