

Human rights law appears on Lewiston's horizon

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Lewiston's newly elected city council has every reason to begin moving toward banning discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity.

The voters spoke. They backed three councilors who pledged to move toward enacting such an ordinance.

Councilors-elect Mike Collins and

Jesse Maldonado endorsed passing a measure outright during an Oct. 22 League of Women Voters candidate forum. Although Councilor-elect Bob Blakey told the same forum he opposed the concept, he later told the Tribune's Joel Mills he would support outgoing Mayor Kevin Poole's suggestion of assigning a revived human rights commission with the task of building the case for a local law.

"I botched it," Blakey told Mills. "That's not who I am. There are hostile people toward the gay population in Lewiston, but I'm not one of them."

That leaves only Councilor-elect Ryan (RJ) Johnson, who told the League forum he opposed passing an ordinance.

That result echoes what happened across Idaho. For reasons either of ideology or timidity, Idaho legislators won't touch the issue. So under Idaho law, gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transgendered people - and individuals who are perceived as such - can lose their jobs. They can be denied housing. And a business can refuse them service.

One by one, Idaho cities stepped up, passing ordinances to protect all the citizens living and working within their communities. Sandpoint was first. Boise followed suit, as did Moscow, Ketchum, Coeur d'Alene, Pocatello and Idaho Falls.

With the possible exception of

Pocatello's election, no councilor or mayor was defeated or elected on the basis of that action. Voters were comfortable with what their city leaders had done and moved on to other concerns.

In fact, Republican pollster Bob Moore - in a study commissioned by the Idaho chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union - has found 67 percent support among Idahoans for ending discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity. When it came to banning discrimination on the job, support shot up to 81 percent.

Nor is this a recent phenomenon. Although Idahoans voted to ban same-sex marriage in 2006, they slapped down the Idaho Citizen Alliance's anti-gay initiative a dozen years earlier.

Nez Perce County defeated the 1994 ICA initiative by almost 54 percent.

Lewiston's election sets up three council votes presumably in favor of a revived human rights commission. Add in incumbent Jim Kleeburg, who also supports the commission alternative, and possibly Councilor Ged Randall, who earlier this year joined a 5-2 majority in favor of protecting city employees against on-the-job discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation.

Passing an ordinance won't necessarily win any of them more votes. But it probably won't cost them any support, either. There's no political reason for Lewiston councilors to hesitate bringing their city into the fold of Idahoans who will act when their own legislators fail to do so.

What Lewiston's elected leaders do next is simply a matter of conscience. - M.T.