

City of Lewiston bans gay discrimination

City's hiring/housing ordinance draws standing-room-only crowd

Joel Mills/Lewiston Tribune

The city of Lewiston joined eight other Idaho cities Monday by adopting an ordinance that bans discrimination in housing, employment and public accommodation based on sexual orientation and gender identity/expression.

The ordinance also bans discrimination based on familial status. It passed along the same 5-2 lines that emerged over three readings, with Mayor Pro Tem Ryan (RJ) Johnson and Councilor Clinton Daniel voting no.

The Lewiston City Council's final vote on the matter drew a standing-room-only crowd to the Lewis-Clark State College Library. Residents of Lewiston and the surrounding area lined up for an hour and a half to offer their opinions on the controversial ordinance, with people speaking about 2-1 in favor.

Daniel said that even though he is against all discrimination, he wondered if the ordinance addresses a problem that truly exists.

"What businesses in the city of Lewiston are actually discriminating?" he asked, noting that members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community are already protected from crimes like assault and fraud, and can now get married and join the military. "There's no barriers left for the LGBT community."

Councilor Ged Randall, who helped author the ordinance with Councilors Bob Blakey and Jesse Maldonado, said he was at ease voting in favor because he heard no opposition from large businesses or groups like the Lewis Clark Valley Chamber of Commerce.

And even though he heard several residents cite their religious beliefs in their opposition, Randall said he has heard no opposition from any religious leaders.

"We haven't had a cardinal walk in the door and say the Catholic Church is dead-set against it," he said, noting the constitutional separation of church and state. "The church doesn't set the edicts for the government."

Randall also referenced the comments of Lewiston resident Colleen Mahoney, who compared the movement for gay rights to historic struggles that abolished slavery, gave women the vote and institutionalized civil rights for racial minorities.

Several residents who opposed the ordinance spoke of their concern that it would allow transgendered individuals to use whatever public restroom they choose. Speaking directly to them, Maldonado said those people are already using the restroom of their choice.

He also dismissed concerns that the ordinance would lead to sexual assaults against children in restrooms.

"People go to the bathroom to use the bathroom, then they leave," he said, drawing a rebuke from Daniel, who called the comment "snarky."

Lewiston resident Marlowe Daly-Galeano also invoked her children, but to speak in favor of the ordinance.

"I want them to grow up in a world where no one will judge them, and no one will discriminate against them," she said.

Jana Gomez, who was born and raised in Lewiston, decried some of the comments from the opposition as "hateful," adding they made her physically ill.

"It makes me sad that this is my home," Gomez said.

Before passing the ordinance, the council adopted amendments that broadened exemptions for religious entities and changed language in the "penalties" section to more closely reflect other Idaho codes.

But it shot down an amendment proposed by Daniel to broaden the religious exemptions further to include business owners like bakers and florists who have a ceremonial aspect to their services and have "strongly held religious beliefs" against homosexuality.

Mayor Jim Kleeburg, who joined the 5-2 majority in voting against the amendment, said people who opposed the civil rights movement of the 1960s made the same argument to deny services to the black community.

"What's different now?" Kleeburg asked, later invoking his Catholic upbringing while voicing support for the ordinance. "I guess I missed the part where Jesus said we're not all equal."

Councilor Bob Blakey said he was comfortable that religious entities are protected in the ordinance.

Mills may be contacted at jmills@lmtribune.com or (208) 848-2266.