

Date: Thu, 2 Feb 1995 17:17:46 -0600 (CST)
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Subject: LAWRENCE DEBATES RIGHTS LAW

FROM THE NEWS-TELEGRAPH
FRONT PAGE
JAN 27-FEB 9 1995
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LAWRENCE KS DEBATES RIGHTS LAW
By Jon D. Barnett

LAWRENCE KS-In so many ways it was a familiar scene to those covering Lesbian and Gay rights battles in the *News-Telegraph* region. The five-member city commission held a study session to consider a request from citizens to amend the city's human rights law to include the words "sexual orientation."

At the end of their January 18 study session, the Lawrence city commission decided to ask city staff to research thirty-some questions that undecided commissioners had about the consequences of on it. Proponents had expected the commission to appoint a citizens task force to study the proposal. Everyone expected the commission to delay voting for or against the measure until after city elections in April.

By proponents count, there are only two sure "yes" votes. Three are needed for passage.

Proponents presented testimony from individuals and task forces that documented the existence of discrimination against Gay and Lesbian citizens. Opponents used their time reading from material provided by national the Reverend Don Wilder's American Family Association and the Family Research Institute, which is headed by anti-Gay researcher Paul Cameron. Cameron has been expelled from the American Psychological Association for misrepresenting data in his "research."

"If you add sexual orientation to this ordinance you are playing into their agenda," said Reverend Leo Barbee, Jr., the only person representing the opponents.

Barbee also attributed cited "statistics" about Gay men to a Centers for Disease Control report, when in fact they were from Paul Cameron's research. In a published editorial, he wrongly attributed the same numbers to the Department of Health and Human Services.

According to Barbee, the amendment would provide homosexuals with "special rights," make the city susceptible to multi-million dollar lawsuits and promote sexual perversions, such as necromancy.

Barbee also accused Lesbian and Gay rights supporters of "building power centers" and "cozy relationships" with city officials, and of having "an updated Gay agenda."

Three proponents of the amendment testified. Lynn Green, co-chair of Simply Equal and immediate past president of the Lawrence chapter of National Organization for Women played a tape recording of a citizen who had experienced anti-Gay discrimination first hand. Dennis Saleebey, director of the PhD Program of the School of Social Welfare at the University of Kansas, explained the differences between sexual orientation and sexual behavior to the commission. He also presented testimony from several task forces that had examined the question of anti-Gay and Lesbian discrimination, including one at KU.

"We have collected a variety of information that supports our contention that Lawrence residents have friends, neighbors and family members who

suffer from discrimination based on real or perceived sexual orientation," said Ben Zimmerman, Simply Equal's other co-chair. "Lawrence -likes to think of itself as a tolerant, accepting and supportive community. It's time to make those words real."

Zimmerman believes that Lawrence is witnessing a new approach by the theocratic right in opposing local and state anti-discrimination for Gays and Lesbians. Instead of arguing their case on religious grounds, opponents are relying more on propaganda--the anti-Gay video Gay Rights Special Rights has been distributed in area churches and to city commission members--and on "experts," such as Paul Cameron.

Another tactic that was evident at the Lawrence city commission hearing was to recruit an African American, Barbee, to "front" for the opposition.

"Part of their new argument is that only minorities have special rights," said Zimmerman. "And Gays, Lesbian and bisexuals aren't deserving minorities."

Mayor Jolene Andersen, sitting across the table from Barbee, looked directly at him during his testimony. Afterwards, she said it saddened her to see some ministers "being duped."

Referring to the video Gay Rights, Special Rights, Andersen said, "The film reminded me of films we were forced to watch in high school that portrayed the civil rights movement as special rights...I don't see any difference here. It's the same song, second verse. When I hear this in Lawrence I become enraged...The other side doesn't argue that discrimination against Gays and Lesbians doesn't exist, but that it's OK."

Andersen said she hadn't planned to speak to the issue at the study session until she heard Barbee's testimony. "I'm ready to vote today, but it may be in the best interest of the community to wait," she said.

When civil rights leader Julian Bond visited Lawrence during the recent Martin Luther King birthday celebration, he told Andersen that Lawrence needed to pass the amendment. Andersen told the *News-Telegraph*, "Julian Bond gave me charge, and when you get a charge from someone like him you don't ignore it."

<http://www.qrd.org/qrd/usa/kansas/lawrence/1995/lawrence.debates.rights.law-nt-01.27.95>