



Pinellas may expand bias rules

Gays, lesbians and bisexuals could get added protection from discrimination in the county.

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Pinellas County leaders are considering expanding their human rights ordinance to protect gays, lesbians and bisexuals.

If approved by the County Commission, Pinellas would join a growing number of jurisdictions in Florida and nationwide that have prohibited discrimination in housing, employment and public accommodations based on sexual orientation.

"It's time," said County Commissioner Susan Latvala, who pushed for the revision. "It's past time. It's very much the right thing to do."

The county's current human rights ordinance bars discrimination for race, color, religion, national origin, sex, age, marital status and physical disability.

Last year, advocates privately urged Pinellas commissioners to make the changes, but there was a sense that the timing was off. Now, advocates and county attorneys are developing language that can withstand a legal challenge. They hope to schedule a public hearing within weeks.

If approved, the ordinance would be binding throughout Pinellas. However, because of the county's charter, municipalities would have the right to opt out.

Common to such ordinances are exemptions for religious groups. Churches, for instance, would be free to discriminate in favor of like-minded people in hiring. It's this attempt to balance interests that Commissioner Ken Welch supports.

Welch belongs to a conservative church that condemns homosexuality. He shares the values of his church, but he also thinks government should foster fairness.

"My faith shouldn't be a litmus test for whether any member of this community has access to housing or a job," Welch said.

One unresolved question is just how far to extend protection.

The current proposed language forbids discrimination based on sexual orientation, defined as "an individual's actual or perceived heterosexuality, homosexuality or bisexuality."

Karen Doering, senior counsel for the National Center for Lesbian Rights, wants the ordinance also to bar discrimination based on a person's gender identity or expression, which would include the transgendered.

According to Doering, 10 jurisdictions in Florida include protections for both sexual orientation and gender identity or expression. They include Broward County, Orange County, Key West and Gainesville.

Also Tuesday, the commission agreed to enter talks with a development group interested in bringing retail, housing and recreation projects to the abandoned 240-acre Toytown landfill. Industrial Realty Group of California and Bear Creek Capital of Ohio say they will assume environmental liability for the dump, which needs to be cleaned up before any building can occur.

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