

Panel kills bill outlawing bias against gay men and lesbians

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BATON ROUGE — A bill to outlaw workplace discrimination against gay men and lesbians was killed by a House committee Thursday, making it likely that the emotionally charged legislation is dead for the session.

House Bill 1917, by Rep. Melinda Schwegmann, D-New Orleans, was part of an effort to bar employers from firing people because of their sexual orientation. Over the years, lawmakers have tried four times to pass the measure.

Proponents said this year's version of the bill was tailored to address the concerns of church and business groups. It exempted religious organizations and set a high legal burden for proving discrimination.

The bill doesn't give anyone special protection, Schwegmann told the House Committee on Labor and Industrial Relations. It merely helps victims who have no legal recourse today.

"If you don't think that there is discrimination and there is bias, then you are naive," Schwegmann said.

The bill attracted a handful of supporters who spoke of their own experiences with job discrimination, or on behalf of gay friends and children.

"People seem to think that all these gay people don't have mamas and daddies, but they do," said Jackie Plaisance, a Baton Rouge resident who said she has two gay sons. "They have mamas and daddies and aunts and uncles who love them."

But the bill also drew at least two dozen opponents, who spoke against the proposal for more than an hour.

A few speakers addressed the measure's legal implications. Doug Sunseri, a Metairie labor lawyer, said it would be hard to determine who was protected under the bill.

Warren Privette, who represents a group of human resource managers, said the bill would force employers to seek information about their employees' sexual orientation.

But most opponents said they disliked the bill because of their religious beliefs. Many quoted Scripture liberally and chastised bill supporters for condoning

what they called "deviant behavior."

"You're trying to legitimize something that cannot be made legitimate," one pastor said.

But Schwegmann said the bill would protect people who had done nothing wrong.

"We're not talking about people who break laws here," she said. "That is not one of the Ten Commandments: 'Thou Shalt Not Be Gay.'"

Several lawmakers who supported Schwegmann's bill said they tried to separate their opposition to homosexuality from their distaste for discrimination.

"We're not condoning a person for being gay. That's not what we're doing today," said Rep. Kenneth Odinet, D-Arabi. "We're saying it's unlawful to fire them."

Still, the committee voted 7-4 to defeat the bill.

A similar bill, by Sen. Paulette Irons, D-New Orleans, passed a Senate committee and awaits a hearing on the Senate floor. Schwegmann said that hearing may never come. But she said the bill's supporters would try again in future years.