

northwest

# Washingtonians Commit

## Gay lawmakers introduce marriage and domestic partnership bills

by Jaymee R. Cuti

A coalition of gay lawmakers from Washington are not afraid of commitment. In fact, empowered by a state Supreme Court decision that came down last summer, they introduced a bill Jan. 16 in the House of Representatives that would deliver full marriage equality to same-sex couples.

But critics, insiders and even the legislators themselves don't actually think the bill has a shot in this session, which began Jan. 8.

But a second bill, also introduced Jan. 16, is a much more palatable proposal for Washingtonians still not comfortable with the idea of gay marriage.

"The strategy is we understand there's not much support for marriage at this particular time; however, it's important to begin the discussion and education with the state and members of the Legislature," said state Rep. Jim Moeller, D-Vancouver. "In the meantime, our families need and deserve protection."

The second bill, which has the bipartisan support of 55 House lawmakers (only 49 are needed to pass the bill on to the Senate), is a domestic partnership benefits bill, which extends rights such as health care, end-of-life decisions, inheritance and retirement benefits to registered domestic partners.

In addition to Moeller, state Sen. Ed Murray, D-Seattle, and state Reps. Joe McDermott and Jamie Pedersen, both D-Seattle, and Dave Upthegrove, D-Des Moines, are working on the bills.

"I think this is a very smart package of bills, and it reflects the humanity of our Legislature to address the needs of real people right now and the aspirational goals of gay and lesbian people," said Josh Friedes, advocacy director of Seattle-based Equal Rights Washington.

The less popular marriage bill is supported by 25 state representatives. That bill, based largely on California's domestic partnership benefits law, aims to create a civil marriage contract between two people; eliminate gender-specific language in the marriage statute; extend the approximately 423 state statutes available to married couples to domestic partners; and recognize same-sex marriages that were validly entered into in other states.

"Marriage is really what our goal is," said Moeller, who is one of five openly gay legislators in Washington. "This is not a session that marriage will pass, but I believe this is a session that domestic partnership benefits will pass."

Last year, the House passed an anti-discrimination law that included banning discrimination based on sexual orientation, by a 60-37 House vote that was approved 25-23 in the Senate.

State activists say even in the face of imminent defeat, full marriage equality is still worth fighting for today.

"What we have found after having conversations with advocates, activists and coalition part-

ners across the state is people are undeterred by having lost the marriage equality lawsuit and desperately want to continue the fight for marriage equality," said Friedes. "Secondly, there is a realization that real families are suffering right now because they don't have the protections of marriage. The two bills really reflect the two priorities of the LGBT community."

While Washington Supreme Court justices upheld the statewide marriage ban last summer, deeming it consistent with the state constitution, several justices clarified that their decision did not negate a legislative action to allow same-sex marriage.

Several lessons can be taken from recent marriage equality losses sustained by their border state to the south, say Washingtonians.

Friedes said his organization is in contact with Basic Rights Oregon. "They are very helpful to us in developing our strategy, particularly the need for a vibrant grassroots movement," he said.

According to Moeller, he and coalition partners are learning from Oregon's experience fighting a referendum, should the proposed bill or bills pass in the Legislature.

"Anything that we do pass is open to referen-



**State Rep. Jim Moeller, D-Vancouver, addresses a crowd after last summer's Washington Supreme Court ruling that upheld a statewide marriage ban.**

dum, so we need to be mindful that domestic partnership registry may very well end up on the ballot, and we feel we can defend it," he said. "Our families deserve these protections, and when you sit and talk to people about that, even people who are opposed to marriage say there should be some protections."

The bills do not yet have hearings scheduled, but an optimistic Moeller says he expects the domestic partnership benefits bill to pass relatively quickly. He hopes to have both legislative bodies debate the domestic partnership bill on the same day. 10

EQUALITY WASHINGTON is holding two upcoming events. *Vow to Take a Stand*, a community discussion about marriage equality, takes place Feb. 11 in Vancouver. The third annual Equality Day, including a rally and lobby session, runs from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Feb. 26 at the Capitol in Olympia. To register visit [www.equalrightswashington.org](http://www.equalrightswashington.org).