

Portland Press Herald EST. 1862 Maine Sunday Telegram

[Home](#) [News](#) [Sports](#) [Business](#) [Editorials](#) [Nemitz](#) [iHerald](#) [Obituaries](#) [Classifieds](#) [Place an Ad](#) [Home Delivery](#) [Reader Services](#)

Gay-rights debate packs hearing

PAUL CARRIER Staff Writer, *The Associated Press* contributed to this report.
Portland Press Herald / Maine Sunday Telegram

 [E-mail a letter to the editor](#)

 [printer-friendly version](#)

March 24, 2005
Final, FRONT, page A1

Martin Ripley of Augusta, who is gay, told a legislative committee Wednesday that the state must outlaw discrimination because his sexual orientation has cost him several jobs over the years, either because he got fired or because he had to quit in the face of unbearable harassment. Michael Stultz of Windham, who opposes such legislation, told the Legislature's Judiciary Committee that homosexual activity is unnatural and immoral, and that the push for a gay-rights law is "a thinly disguised agenda to position Maine to legalize homosexual marriage."

Dozens of people offered competing arguments for four hours Wednesday as the Legislature began the latest debate in a decades-long struggle over gay rights. At issue this time is a bill filed by Gov. John Baldacci to prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation in employment, credit, education, housing and public accommodations.

The measure, known as LD 1196, would add "sexual orientation" to the classes covered by the Maine Human Rights Act, which now prohibits discrimination based on such factors as race, age, religion, ancestry and disability.

The bill defines sexual orientation as "a person's actual or perceived heterosexuality, bisexuality, homosexuality or gender identity or expression."

Wednesday's hearing attracted a standing-room-only crowd of more than 150 people, most of whom wore green or pink stickers that said: "LD 1196 = equality." Supporters outnumbered opponents, but at least a dozen people testified against the bill.

The committee did not vote on Wednesday but may do so today. That could set the stage for the full Legislature to take up the bill as soon as next week.

Noting that 38 percent of the hate crimes documented in Maine in 2003 involved sexual orientation, Kurt Adams, an aide to Baldacci, told the committee that that statistic provides "a window on the potential extent of discrimination in employment, housing and public accommodations in Maine."

"This is not about extending special rights, as some have suggested in the past," said Sen. Karl Turner, R-Cumberland, who filed the bill for Baldacci. "It's about a level playing field" for all Mainers.

The bill's supporters included heterosexuals, gays, lesbians and people who have changed their gender. Debbie McBride of Hartford, a "transgendered person" who previously was a man, said she left a well-paying job as a college instructor because the administration could not adequately protect her against a student who was openly harassing her.

"Some people say the laws in Maine protect all Mainers. Trust me, that is not the case," McBride said. "People look at me and see who I am and I cannot get a job."

"I'm ashamed that our current law condones discrimination," said Attorney General Steven Rowe, who backs the bill.

Adam Flanders of Belfast, who is 18, said he was routinely harassed and threatened in high school because he is gay, yet teachers and administrators did not put a stop to it.

"At least with this law, the state would be saying that, hate me or not, I have a right to be in that school," Flanders said. "I have a right to a safe environment where I can learn."

Ripley, the Augusta man, said he was subjected to death threats while working at Bath Iron Works and decided to quit after he was struck in the back with a bolt. He said his sexual orientation caused him to be fired from subsequent jobs, although he now has a decent occupation.

"The long and short of why I am here is this: I am a hard worker and enjoy having a job. But it's been very hard for me to keep a job since I came out nine years ago," he told the committee.

Opponents said the bill is a bad idea made worse by the fact that it ignores the will of the people. Maine voters have twice rejected gay-rights laws, "yet the governor is moving forward with legislation that serves the interest of a small minority," Stultz told lawmakers.

Rep. Brian Duprey, R-Hampden, said the bill defines sexual orientation so broadly that "there will be no employee out there who will not be protected" if the bill becomes law.

For example, Duprey said, the bill would force an employer to hire a man who lives as a woman and wants a job in a women's locker room. If a male employee who deals with the public shows up for work one day "wearing a mini-skirt and a tube top, that person is protected, too," under this bill, he said.

Other opponents said the Legislature should kill the bill or at least send it to the voters to let them decide the issue. They said gays and lesbians do not deserve protection based on sexual orientation because they choose that orientation and do not belong to a class of people that is economically, politically or educationally disadvantaged.

"The people of Maine do not want or need legislation making sexual orientation a special class of citizenship," said Deanne Rogan of Houlton.

If the state passes a law protecting sexual activity that many Christians believe is morally wrong, those Christians "will feel the wrath" of the law for sticking to their religious beliefs, said Pastor Roy Blevins of the Church of the Open Bible in Athens.

Other clergymen backed the bill, but two religious organizations that had been expected to play prominent roles in the legislative debate did not do so at Wednesday's hearing.

The Christian Civic League of Maine, which opposes the bill, announced this week that it would boycott the hearing, in part because the voters have already spoken twice on the issue and the league believes the Legislature should not tackle it yet again.

Bishop Richard Malone of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Portland announced Wednesday that he will remain neutral on the legislation.

Staff Writer Paul Carrier can be contacted at 622-7511 or at:

pcarrier@pressherald.com

Staff photos by Doug Jones

Maine Attorney General Steven Rowe testifies Wednesday in support of Gov. Baldacci's proposed gay-rights bill. Listening in the foreground are Legislative Judiciary Committee members, from left, Rep. Deborah Pelletier-Simpson, D-Auburn; Sen. Barry Hobbins, D-Saco, and Sen. Lynn Bromley, D-South Portland.

Martin Ripley, a gay man from Augusta, tells legislators Wednesday of his struggles with discrimination. Ripley supports LD 1196, the proposed gay-rights bill.

Michael Stultz explains his opposition to gay-rights legislation at Wednesday's Judiciary Committee hearing. The Windham resident objects on moral grounds.

ABOUT THE MEASURE

THE GAY-RIGHTS BILL filed by Gov. John Baldacci would prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation in employment, credit, education, housing and public accommodations, but the bill exempts privately funded, nonprofit religious organizations. The bill does not call for a referendum.

MaineToday.com [Table of Contents](#)

[News](#): [Portland Press Herald/Maine Sunday Telegram](#) [Kennebec Journal](#) [Morning Sentinel](#) [Community Leader](#) [Coastal Journal](#) [Updates](#) [AP Wire](#) [Weather](#)

[Sports](#): [High School Sports](#) [Sea Dogs](#) [Boston Red Sox](#) [Patriots](#)

[Business](#): [Blogs](#) [Small Business 101](#) [News](#) [Features](#) [Calendar](#) [Resources](#) [Business Classifieds](#)

[Arts & Entertainment](#): [Calendar](#) [Movies](#) [Music](#) [Dining](#)

[Travel](#): [Maine Regions](#) [Things to Do](#) [Maine Guide](#) [From Away](#) [Vacation Rentals](#) [Lodging Guide](#) [Campgrounds](#)

[Outdoors](#): [Biking](#) [Camping](#) [Fishing](#) [Hiking](#) [Hunting](#) [Nature Watching](#) [Outdoors with Children](#)

Other sections: [Blogs](#) [Pets](#) [Kids & Family](#) [Personals](#)

Classifieds: [MaineJobs](#) [Real Estate](#) [Wheels](#) [Marketplace](#) [Celebrations](#) [Place an ad](#)

[Portland Press Herald/Maine Sunday Telegram](#): [News](#) [Sports](#) [Business](#) [Editorials](#) [Nemitz](#) [iHerald](#) [Obituaries](#) [Special Reports](#) [Reader Services](#)

[Kennebec Journal](#): [News](#) [Sports](#) [Obituaries](#) [Viewpoints](#) [Reader Services](#)

[Morning Sentinel](#): [News](#) [Sports](#) [Obituaries](#) [Viewpoints](#) [Reader Services](#)

[Advertising](#): [Advertising products](#) [Audience](#) [Content areas](#) [Service](#) [Contact us](#)

[Questions/Comments?](#)

Copyright © 2006, Blethen Maine Newspapers, Inc.