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Sunday, June 11, 2000

Gay rights making quiet gains

Lost business, Olympic bid could revive Issue 3 fight

By Mark Curnutte
The Cincinnati Enquirer

Quietly, support for gay rights is growing in diverse parts of Greater Cincinnati.

One outcome could be an attempt to throw out a city prohibition against protections for homosexuals, believed to be the only one of its type in the nation. One gay-rights group is already collecting signatures for a possible repeal attempt.

Today, as the city sees its first gay-pride parade in five years, support for gay rights is building:

- Some say Issue 3, the 1993 city charter amendment that prohibits the city from adopting any laws protecting gays and lesbians, is bad for business and could hurt the city's bid for the 2012 Summer Olympics.

A yet-to-be-released analysis by the Greater Cincinnati Convention and Visitors Bureau estimates that the city has lost \$63.7 million in convention business since Issue 3 passed because of a boycott organized by gay-friendly organizations.

- Procter & Gamble Co., one of the region's largest employers and most influential institutions, gave \$1,000 to its gay employees group for today's Cincinnati Gay Pride Parade 2000. The donation was the first to gay employees for use other than in internal company business. It coincided with P&G's highly publicized decision to pull advertising from Dr. Laura Schlessinger's upcoming television show because of controversy surrounding her anti-gay comments.

- More local companies are offering health care and other benefits to partners of gay and lesbian employees, says Michael Hawkins, a lawyer and partner in the firm Dinsmore and Shohl and former chairman of the Cincinnati Human Relations Commission.

Jack Rouse Associates, a Cincinnati design firm involved with Riverfront development, started offering partner benefits in April 1999. Federated Department Stores Inc., based in Cincinnati, has offered the benefits to its 130,000 employees for several years.

- The Catholic Archdiocese of Cincinnati started a ministry last fall that's viewed as a national model for its support of gays, their families and friends. This fall, the area's largest Catholic college, Xavier University, plans to issue a student welcoming statement that prohibits harassment of gays and lesbians on campus.

"You're seeing this city wanting to be a world-class city and realizing to be a world-class city that you can't discriminate against any one," says Jeff Thomas, 43, of Anderson Township. Mr. Thomas, who has been openly gay for 22 years, owns Jeff Thomas Catering in Ludlow, Ky.

"The black community didn't get anywhere in the civil-rights movement without the white community," he says. "The only way we're going to evolve is to have help, too."



Chris Good, a parade organizer, stands in front of a banner that will stretch across Hamilton Avenue in Northside.
(Craig Ruttle photo)
[ZOOM](#)

IF YOU GO

- **What:** Cincinnati Gay Pride Parade and Rally.
- **When:** 11 a.m. today. Parade begins at noon.
- **Where:** Rally at the Burnet Woods gazebo, Clifton. Parade will follow 1.8-mile route from Burnet Woods on Ludlow Avenue, across Ludlow Viaduct and onto Hamilton Avenue in Northside, ending at Hoffer Park.
- **Miscellaneous:** A festival and stage show will be held from 1-5 p.m. today at Hoffer Park, Blue Rock Road and Hamilton Avenue, Northside.
- **Information:** 389-9182.

Changing times

Conversations about gay life in Cincinnati almost always come around to Issue 3.

It was voted in, 56,000 to 34,000, in 1993, a time when such battles were being fought all across the country. In some cases, ballot issues similar to Cincinnati's were voted down. Other measures that passed were ruled unconstitutional by the courts. Cincinnati's may be the only one that survived.

Issue 3 was a reaction to a call from gays for protection against discrimination. Backers of the issue said gays already have full rights under city laws and special protections were unnecessary.

But now the city's bid for the 2012 Olympics, with its international notice and huge financial rewards, is raising Issue 3 again. Some local Olympics boosters are worried about the consequences that Issue 3 might bring.

They recall that Cobb County, Ga., just north of Atlanta, lost the volleyball venue in the 1996 Summer Games after a national uproar over an anti-gay measure there. Cobb County commissioners had passed a resolution stating that the gay lifestyle was incompatible with community standards.

Leaders of gay-rights organizations in Cincinnati have promised similar protests here.

"They know it (Issue 3) doesn't look good," says the Rev. Harold Porter, co-chair of the Committee to Restore Fairness, a group that is collecting signatures it needs to get a possible repeal amendment on the November ballot. It needs 8,331 signatures by the end of August to get on the ballot.

Nick Vehr was a city councilman in 1995 when he voted to make city law consistent with Issue 3. Today, he's president of Cincinnati 2012 Inc., the organization heading the effort to land the Olympics.

Mr. Vehr says he doesn't know if Issue 3 is an obstacle to the Olympics bid and says the group's board hasn't discussed it.

But others say Issue 3 masks the city's diversity.

"Would it be better if we didn't have any legislation about sexual orientation? Yes," says John Williams, president of the Greater Cincinnati Chamber of Commerce.

"The tragedy is there are people of good faith on both sides who strongly feel there needs to be legislation. We should be able to live together, work together and communicate together without worrying about discrimination."

An analysis by the convention and visitors bureau shows a financial downside to Issue 3, too. It says that \$63.7 million in convention business has not come to Cincinnati because of Issue 3. The losses include cancellations and tentative bookings that were dropped, bureau spokeswoman Gayle Harden-Renfro says. The analysis does not include organizations that didn't bother to call.

One of the largest groups that had considered Cincinnati was the Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, which would have brought 7,000 members and needed 3,000 hotel rooms in March 1999. That convention would have been worth more than \$6 million.

For context, Cincinnati last year welcomed 363,300 total conventioners, whose business brought \$312 million into the region.

"Issue 3 hurts Cincinnati," says Jim Bush, who owns City Dash, a delivery service in Queensgate with 150 employees. "How does it look to a national or international company that's considering Cincinnati for us to have this?"

Focus on Procter

Procter & Gamble's \$1,000 donation to employees involved with today's parade, coupled with its pulling advertising support for the *Dr. Laura* TV show, worries some conservative groups.

P&G spokeswoman Gretchen Briscoe says the donation to its gay employees group is similar to donations to workers involved with Chinese New Year's celebrations, other Asian-American events and a deaf festival in Northern Kentucky.

"P&G is a company that clearly recognizes the importance of diversity," Ms. Briscoe says. "We are not advocating any lifestyle."

The decision to pull advertising from *Dr. Laura* was done, she says, to remove P&G brands from a controversial subject. On her radio show, Dr. Laura has called homosexuality a "biological error" and "deviant behavior."

On Monday, the day after the gay-pride parade, leaders of some pro-family, Christian-right organizations will meet with P&G officials to express their concerns, says Phil Burress, board president of Equal Rights, Not Special Rights Inc. The groups represent more than 30 million families and include Focus on the Family, American Family Association, Coral Ridge Ministries and Sharonville-based Citizens for Community Values, he says.

"We are in the asking-questions stage," Mr. Burress says. "They have to explain why they are refusing to advertise on a pro-family show like *Dr. Laura* but why they would give \$1,000 to homosexual activists."

On June 19, P&G will be the site of a protest by anti-gay activist the Rev. Fred Phelps and members of his Westboro Baptist Church from Topeka, Kan. According to the church's Web site, its members will "preach, protest and warn" at P&G.

Stonewall Cincinnati, the area's leading gay-rights group, will respond that day by asking its supporters to purchase a P&G product and donate to an organization that works with the gay community, such as AIDS Volunteers of Cincinnati.

Faith in action

Several churches, religious groups and faith-based organizations that opposed Issue 3 in 1993 have attracted new followers with action in 2000.

The Archdiocese of Cincinnati in April 1999 became one of the first dioceses in the country to create a ministry for gays, lesbians and their families.

While maintaining that homosexual sex is wrong, the Catholic bishops nonetheless encourage parents of gay children not to forsake them, but to continue to love them and recognize that homosexuality is "not freely chosen."

"The church is trying to reach out to the people," Peg Black, director of the archdiocese Family Life department, says. "It's not the person. People are always welcome."

The ministry has held workshops in local Catholic high schools, teaching straight people that gay people are not to be discriminated against because of their sexual orientation. There is a support group for parents of gay children at Good Shepherd Church in Symmes Township. There is talk of groups for children and ex-spouses of gay people.

At Xavier University, a 6,500-student Catholic college in Avondale, students will find a statement on sexual orientation in their handbooks beginning in the fall.

"This university states unequivocally that gay and lesbian students, faculty, staff, administrators and alumni are welcome members of the university community," the statement says.

A petition with 1,200 signatures was presented to the university's president, the Rev. James Hoff. He and the university's board of trustees approved the statement this spring. A similar effort by students failed five years earlier.

"We will not tolerate the harassment of individuals based on sexual orientation," Ron Slepitz, Xavier vice president for student development, says. Students who violate the statement are subject to discipline under the university's anti-harassment policy.

Even some Tristate high schools have started clubs and programs, unheard of five years ago, to work against discrimination of gays. Walnut Hills and Finneytown have gay-straight student alliances while others, including Sycamore, offer programs to assist gay students.

New allies, old foes

Without attracting attention, Stonewall Cincinnati has been attempting to win new allies. After years of declining attendance, more than 950 people of all sexual orientations attended the group's annual dinner in April.

"We have built bridges to different groups, predominantly African-American groups," says Doreen Cudnik, executive director of Stonewall Cincinnati. She has appeared on the NAACP's radio program.

But support for gay rights is still far from overwhelming.

The group Equal Rights, Not Special Rights Inc. remains in place and ready to fight any repeal effort of Issue 3, Mr. Burress says.

"Now, more than ever, we have more ammunition from the Sixth Circuit and U.S. Supreme Court that gay rights are not civil rights," Mr. Burress says.

In 1997, the Sixth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals upheld its 1994 ruling that allowed Issue 3 to be implemented. And in 1998, the U.S. Supreme Court refused to hear an appeal.

"The playing field is now level, and we're ready to fight to keep it that way," Mr. Burress says.

National estimates place the gay population between 2 percent and 3 percent of the general population. Using those estimates, there may be 40,000 to 60,000 gay people in the Tristate. Liberty Hill, Northside and the Cincinnati neighborhoods near the University of Cincinnati are known to have the highest numbers of gay residents and gay-oriented and gay-friendly businesses.

Gay in Cincinnati

Many gay people say the best way to get along in this town is to keep quiet about their sexuality. As a result, leaders of gay organizations say, thousands of gay men and lesbians remain in the closet or are partially "out" — revealing their sexuality with family but not in the office.

The last gay-pride parade was in June 1995 — less than two years after the Issue 3 vote — and about 300 people marched downtown.

"People just got fed up and went underground after Issue 3. It was like, 'What's the use?'" says John Maddux, a University of Cincinnati English professor and former three-term president of the Greater Cincinnati Gay/Lesbian Coalition.

"But if Issue 3 were repealed, everything that follows would be good. It would be a tremendous shot in the arm that would make everyone feel good again."

Mayor Charlie Luken has lent weight to the gay-pride parade, declaring today "Gay, Lesbian, Bi-sexual and Transgender Pride Day." A proclamation says the city "respects and values the contributions" of its gay community and "takes pride in assuming national leadership in accepting people of all backgrounds as valuable and contributing participants of its local society."

Gay residents say today's parade is about self-respect and community worth.

"We want to be visible," says Michael X. Chanak, a P&G employee who is adviser to the parade committee and a veteran organizer of Tristate gay and lesbian groups. "We want people to see we are proud of who we are."

[Northside becoming center of gay life](#)

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