

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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The Meaning of Marriage

Marriage was the headline subject at the State House last week when the house and senate met together to debate a constitutional amendment to define marriage as a heterosexual union. The matter is a very difficult one, involving as it does both highly personal issues and public policy considerations. Massachusetts is a caring state.

After two days, the assembly recessed for a month, and we will return to the discussion on March 11. Here is the letter I sent early last week to people who wrote to me on the topic, followed by some thoughts on the debate itself.

“Dear Friend,

“Thank you for writing to me about the constitutional amendment to define marriage. Since the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court decreed last November that local officials must issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples, people from all over my legislative district, the state and the nation have contacted my office. Weighing in by phone, letter or email, each one asks me to support a specific point of view. Recognizing both the importance of the issue and the fact that my vote cannot please everyone, I have given much thought to my vote.

“Before the SJC decision, I stated my belief that marriage is the union of a man and a woman. I did not support legislation to change that traditional definition, nor did I support the earlier "definition of marriage" amendment to our constitution because of its prohibition of benefits to non-traditional unions. The court redefined marriage, and its decision changed the debating field. Marriage licenses, according to the Supreme Judicial Court, must be granted to same-sex couples 180 days after the November ruling. The court has just reaffirmed its earlier opinion.

“Marriage has a long historical and traditional definition as a heterosexual union. By rejecting that definition as unconstitutional, the state's highest court removed the legislature's authority to restore that meaning to our laws. In response to the court's action, I will vote on February 11 to place before the voters a question that defines marriage as a heterosexual union while not banning benefits to other partners.

“Only the voters have the final authority to change the constitution, and the Supreme Judicial Court has required such change in order to limit marriage to heterosexual couples. That amendment must be placed before a similar constitutional convention in the next legislative session even if the proposal is approved by a majority of the elected members. If approved by both sessions, the proposal will be presented to the voters in November of 2006.

“(Signed) Mary Rogeness”

NOTE: I continue to support the people's right to vote on a simple amendment defining marriage. Four unelected judges reversed thousands of years of tradition, and it is appropriate for the voters to have a say on the issue. I voted at the constitutional convention to place two different “definition” amendments on the ballot. Neither amendment prohibited statutory establishment of civil unions by the legislature, which I will support. I opposed a third amendment that put before voters a single question that, in addition to defining heterosexual marriage, embedded language in the constitution to define civil unions as its equivalent. When the convention recessed, a filibuster was being conducted to prevent action on any amendment.