

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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Gay Marriage Debate

Last week the State House was totally consumed by the issue of gay marriage. Thursday was the day scheduled for a vote on gay marriage, and tension mounted as the days passed.

A January vote showed slim support for moving a constitutional amendment to next year's ballot. More than the 50 necessary legislators were on record in favor of putting the question to a popular vote. Supporters lobbied to keep their votes, while opponents worked to change a few minds. Opponents had an ace in the hole: leaders could recess the session if the necessary votes could not be changed.

The joint meeting of the senate and house of representatives met at 1:00 last Thursday. The senate president called immediately for a vote. Rumors of vote switching ran through the building. One state representative had suffered a serious head injury the day before, hitting his head on the marble steps of the State House, so he was at home recovering. That left supporters with a maximum of 56 votes.

The senate voted first with a call of the roll, and two former supporters were now opposed. Then the tally board for representatives opened. Most members voted quickly, but a few waited until the last moment to cast their changed votes. When the results were tallied, ten votes had changed.

Only 45 members voted to advance the question. As one of those 45 members, I received many e-mails about my vote. These neighboring examples from my Inbox are probably symbolic of every other representative, whichever way we voted. One says, "Thank you" and the next is titled "Shame on you." Of course, the text of the messages varies according to the vote we cast.

If the senders are thanking me for voting against gay marriage, their thanks are misplaced. I voted to allow voters a say in the issue.

The highest courts in several other states have ruled that a change in defining marriage should be subject to legislative or popular vote. New York, Washington and California courts agree on that.

But we live in Massachusetts. Our Supreme Judicial Court avoided both popular and representative decision-making, making gay marriage a fait accompli. Only a constitutional amendment could have challenged their ruling.

If the writers scorn me for voting against civil rights, I did not. Civil rights cannot come or go at the whim of voters.

Some advocates of same sex marriage equate voting rights for women or African-Americans, but the issues are not the same. After fighting a Civil War that gave freedom to former slaves, white Americans ratified the 13th, 14th and 15th amendments to the Constitution to confer rights to all men. Women gained that equal status even later when national and state legislatures, comprised mostly of men, ratified the 19th amendment.

I understand the emotion of gay marriage supporters, particularly those who have taken advantage of the new ruling to marry and felt threatened by the amendment. Their joy radiated through the State House after the session closed. My congratulations on their winning campaign.

And now the legislature can tackle other hot button issues – like mandatory seat belt usage. If you thought this issue was divisive, just wait until that debate hits the floor of the house!