

104th CONGRESS: 100-DAY COUNT

Gingrich to eye pro-gay teaching

House will probe use of tax funds to promote homosexuality

By Joyce Price
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

House Speaker Newt Gingrich says he wants a congressional panel to examine whether schools receiving federal funds should be barred from offering programs and activities that promote homosexuality.

"I do think, at some point this spring or summer, if we can have a one-day hearing on whether or not taxpayer money is being spent to promote things that are literally grotesque, then that's a legitimate request, because that's taxpayer money," Mr. Gingrich told an audience at a town meeting in Kennewick, Ga., last Saturday.

The Georgia Republican was asked about the hearing by a staffer for the Human Rights Campaign Fund (HRCF), the nation's largest homosexual organization, which provided a transcript of the exchange.

By holding the hearing, Mr. Gingrich will be fulfilling a promise he made last fall to the Rev. Louis Sheldon, chairman of the California-based Traditional Values Coalition and a strong opponent of homosexual behavior.

Mr. Sheldon, interviewed yesterday, said he'd recently been assured by Jack Howard, Mr. Gingrich's legislative director, that a hearing will be held.

Leaders of the Human Rights

Campaign Fund, who label Mr. Sheldon an "anti-gay extremist," say they are "disappointed" at Mr. Gingrich's hearing plans.

"Sheldon is all about dehumanizing people and promoting discrimination," said HRCF spokesman Doug Hattaway. "It sounds as if the speaker has fallen into a trap set by Sheldon."

Last year, Mr. Sheldon led an unsuccessful effort to win congressional approval of an amendment to a bill that made changes in federal education programs for elementary and secondary grades.

The amendment would have prohibited schools supported by federal tax dollars from "promoting the homosexual lifestyle" via classroom instruction, library materials, counseling or referrals to outside organizations, according to Sam Coring, spokesman for Rep. Mel Hancock, Missouri Republican, who introduced it.

The so-called "Hancock amendment" was defeated in the House by a 30-vote margin and was replaced by one offered by Rep. Jolene Unsoeld, Washington Democrat, which Mr. Coring called "weaker."

A measure with the Hancock language subsequently passed the Senate by a 2-1 margin.

The final amendment that emerged from House-Senate conference was "worse than the Unsoeld version," Mr. Coring said.

Programs and activities covered by the amendment "had to have the [expressed] purpose of promoting homosexuality," he said, and restrictions applied only to those paid for by federal tax dollars, not state or local money.

Additionally, Mr. Coring said, the conference amendment prohibited the federal Department of Education "from reviewing any material or taking any action."

Mr. Sheldon said he objects to programs such as the "Rainbow Curriculum," which teaches respect for homosexuality and which he says is presented in about half of New York's school districts.

"And the month of June has been declared 'Gay and Lesbian Pride Month' by the Los Angeles Unified School District," he said, citing another example.

The Human Rights Campaign Fund says Mr. Gingrich is "breaking from the focus on a mainstream agenda" by "holding anti-gay hearings."

But in his remarks in Georgia, the speaker made it clear he's first committed to "passing the Contract [With America], passing the budget and passing the appropriations bills."

Because of that, he later acknowledged he couldn't hold the hearing he promised Mr. Sheldon until after August.