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New Jersey To Recognize Gay Couples

Bill Gives Some Benefits, Short of Marriage Status

By LAURA MANSNERUS

TRENTON, Jan. 8 — The debate was expected to be volatile, but members of the New Jersey Senate instead showed broad support on Thursday for a measure to give the state's recognition to same-sex domestic partnerships. The measure, passed by a 23-to-9 vote, goes to Gov. James E. McGreevey, who has said he is eager to sign it.

New Jersey is the fifth state to recognize domestic partnership in some form, though the status accorded gay couples in the new legislation is short of marriage, and of the civil unions allowed in Vermont.

Senators took less than 15 minutes to reach a vote, as opponents fell silent and supporters in the gallery struggled to contain their applause. Five senators spoke in support of the bill, and none voiced opposition.

In the gallery, despite a plea for silence from the Republican co-president of the Senate, John O. Bennett, elation broke out as supporters clapped, laughed and hugged. "I was in tears," said Deborah Smith of Scotch Plains, a mental health therapist who has lived with her partner for 14 years. "After listening to those speeches, I would have voted for whatever they were voting for."

The legislation, which also applies to heterosexual couples over age 62, permits those registered as domestic partners to make critical medical decisions for each other. It requires insurance companies to offer health care coverage to domestic partners equivalent to that for spouses.

The measure also extends health coverage and pension benefits to the domestic partners of state employees, but makes no requirements of private employers.

The legislation does not confer most of the entitlements of marriage, however, like the right to share property acquired during the marriage, to seek financial support when the relationship ends and to be recognized as a family member for many public benefit programs.

Steven Goldstein, who has directed lobbying for the bill for Lambda Legal, a gay-rights organization, said: "I'm on Cloud 27. It's not just that we won. It's that we won without rancor."

Mr. Goldstein, who lives in Brooklyn, added, "Tomorrow, my partner and I are going to see a real estate agent in New Jersey."

Mr. Goldstein contrasted the New Jersey