

## QUEEN CITY BREAKTHROUGH?

**A** BREAKTHROUGH signals that Cincinnati finally may be ready to shed its costly image of intolerance by repealing its decade-old ban on any law that would protect gay people from discrimination. The Ohio city's ban is the only such prohibition written into an American city's charter.



**DEB PRICE**

On Feb. 5, in response to the New Year's Eve murder of a gay man, the Cincinnati City Council broke with the city's anti-gay past. It voted overwhelmingly to expand its hate-crimes law to include attacks based on the victim's sexual orientation.

Predictably, that has stirred up a hornet's nest of anti-gay zealots, who claim the council's action violates the city charter's ban on gay-rights laws. Defenders of the expanded hate-crimes law disagree, saying revisions to the city's criminal code are beyond the reach of the charter's ban.

But everyone in Cincinnati knows that the real question is whether the city council's gutsy move indicates that voters are ready to erase the hateful ban that so damages their city's reputation.

"With this vote, the gay community and the city turned a corner," says Doreen Cudnik of Stonewall Cincinnati, part of a broad coalition seeking repeal of the ban. "People are feeling hope for the first time in a long while . . . that the momentum has shifted, and we are poised to reverse the discrimination in the charter and the terrible message it sends to the entire country. This is a chance to remove that stain."

Cincinnati's steps toward an overdue change of heart are part of a national trend toward realizing that anti-gay ballot measures are mean, un-American and economically stupid: Most Americans don't want to spend money or time in a place known for mistreating gay people.

Anti-gay ballot measures — a painful thorn in gay Americans' sides, particularly since singer Anita Bryant successfully pushed one in Miami in 1977 — are being rejected by voters more often. In fact, anti-gay campaigns are backfiring — actually

building support for those who are gay.

Dave Fleischer's job at the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force is to help communities beat back anti-gay initiatives. He's hoping to turn himself into the unneeded Maytag repairman of the anti-gay ballot initiative world by 2010.

In 2000, the gay-friendly side won just one of six ballot initiatives. But just a year later, it won five of seven. And in 2002, it triumphed in five of six.

Cincinnati passed its anti-gay ban, known as Issue 3, back in 1993. The city got stuck with the awful distinction of being the nation's most overtly anti-gay locale when the U.S. Supreme Court ducked the question of whether Issue 3 is unconstitutional.

The high court's cowardice left Cincinnati stuck behind the rest of the nation. Issue 3 has cost the city at least \$46 million in lost convention revenue, discouraged companies from locating there and prompted many longtime gay residents to flee.

Cincinnati has long had a behind-the-times reputation. Mark Twain once quipped that he'd want to be there for the apocalypse because everything happens 20 years late in Cincinnati.

Yet the city has begun to catch up. Major local employers — including

Procter & Gamble and Federated Department Stores, which owns Macy's and Bloomingdale's — have extended health benefits to the domestic partners of gay workers.

And now local editorial pages are calling for a debate on whether to repeal Issue 3, which the *Cincinnati Business Courier* calls an "albatross . . . hanging around the city's neck."

Issue 3 "has branded Cincinnati

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narrow-minded, provincial and mean-spirited," the paper stressed. "And nobody knows how many talented people it has chased away . . . (because) they just didn't want to be identified with a city that was widely known as being hostile to gays and lesbians."

Cincinnati voters were duped in 1993 into lashing out at their gay neighbors. By simply admitting the anti-gay ban is wrong, the city's voters can put the past behind them.

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