

A Closer Look

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San Francisco Marriage Commissioner Richard Ow, right, married Jeff Whitaker, left, and Ray Sato in the rotunda at City Hall yesterday. More same-sex weddings are expected there today.

Same-sex couples rush to wed in San Francisco

Conservative group tries to get court to stop weddings

By LISA LEFF
Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — Accusing the mayor of trampling the law, conservative groups went to court yesterday to challenge the issuing of same-sex marriage licenses in San Francisco, as hundreds more homosexual couples rushed to tie the knot.

All day long, the marble passages beneath City Hall's ornate gold dome echoed with applause as one couple after another got hitched, promising to be "spouses for life." The weddings will continue on Valentine's Day and through the long holiday weekend.

While it remains unclear what practical value the marriage licenses will carry, their symbolism was evident.

Emboldened by the marriage spree and the prospect of the nation's first legal same-sex marriages in Massachusetts on May 17, homosexuals went to courthouses around the nation Thursday and yesterday to demand the right to wed. They were quickly turned away.

The San Francisco ceremonies occurred as Massachusetts lawmakers ended in a stalemate after two days of impassioned debate. They are considering a ban on same-sex marriage in response to a ruling by the state's high court that said same-sex couples have the right to marry. The legislature will reconvene March 11.

At a hearing in California, Judge James Warren told lawyers for the conservative Alliance Defense Fund that court procedures require them to return Tuesday to properly make their request to block the marriages, which began Thursday with Mayor Gavin Newsom's blessing.

"Apparently, Mayor Newsom felt he's above the law and like a dictator, could simply dictate what the law should be," said Richard Ackerman, an attorney for the Campaign for California Families.

The county clerk issued hundreds

of licenses to same-sex couples, many of whom then promptly got married in City Hall.

"I'm not interested as a mayor in moving forward with a separate but unequal process for people to engage in marriages," Newsom said on ABC's "Good Morning America." "The people of this city and certainly around the state are feeling that separate but unequal doesn't make sense."

San Francisco appears to be the first city in the nation to officially support same-sex marriage licenses.

Hundreds of homosexuals began lining up at 4 a.m. yesterday, many of them rushing into town from other cities to get married before the courts could step in.

Mikko Alanne, 31, and his partner, Ari Solomon, 27, drove in overnight from West Hollywood, a six-hour trip. "This is the first step towards the state recognizing gay marriage," Alanne said. Even though "we won't be recognized outside San Francisco, we are very excited."

The conservative groups wanted a Superior Court judge to order the county clerk not to issue any more licenses to same-sex couples, and to void any licenses already granted.

California law, as approved by the voters in 2000, defines marriage as a union of a man and a woman.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and other state officials have avoided comment, but Attorney General Bill Lockyer's spokeswoman did note that California's constitution provides broader equal-protection rights than other states.

Around the country, other same-sex couples were turned away by court clerks as Thursday's "National Freedom to Marry Day" protests continued into yesterday. The protests have been held every Feb. 12 since 1998.

They also protested in Ohio, where Gov. Bob Taft signed a law last week making it the 38th state to officially bar recognition of same-sex marriages and the second to deny benefits such as health insurance coverage to unmarried employees' partners. The Ohio law is considered one of the most far-reaching bans in the country.