

Henderson ban on gay bias repealed

City Council votes 3-2 to rescind despite forceful objections

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HENDERSON, Ky. — The City Council voted 3-2 last night to repeal an ordinance that protects gays from discrimination in housing, employment and public accommodations.

"I don't think it's a secret this is not wanted," Rick Hile, who had sued the city in opposition to the ordinance, said during a public-comment period. "There will be a lot of happy people in Henderson tomorrow."

A majority of the speakers at the meeting, however, disagreed with Hile and said the ordinance was necessary. After the vote, supporters left the meeting singing, "We Shall Overcome."

"Repealing it sends a message that we were wrong and it's OK to discriminate," said Kyle Burson, 19,

"You're voting to make it legal to discriminate."

The ordinance was adopted 3-2 by the City Council in 1999. Since then, no complaints under it have been filed with the city, which has about 20,000 residents.

SIMILAR ORDINANCES have been approved in other Kentucky communities, including Louisville, Jefferson County and Lexington.

Last fall, city Commissioner Sonny Ward — a supporter of the ordinance — chose not to seek re-election.

Ward's seat was filled by Bob Hall, an ordinance opponent, and it became clear that the two commissioners who voted against the ordinance in 1999, Robby Mills and Russell Sights, would attempt to repeal it, now that the council membership was tipped in their favor.

Hall, Mills and Sights voted last night to repeal the ordinance.

Sights said he was embarrassed by the adoption of the ordinance. "I don't believe it's appropriate for Henderson or its citizens."

Hall said he didn't think the ordi-

nance was necessary because he had never witnessed any discrimination against gays in Henderson. Mills declined to speak.

Mayor Joan Hoffman and council member Michele Deep said they were sad to see the ordinance repealed.

The ordinance was proposed by the Henderson Fairness Alliance, a gay-rights group. The group said members of the gay community had been discriminated against because of their sexual orientation.

At yesterday's meeting, Katherine Hope Goodman, co-chairwoman of the group, said "their determination will not be suffocated" by a vote to repeal.

"Change is already happening. This struggle is not over," Goodman said. "We've not given up on what our community could be."

At one point in the meeting, the Rev. Jerry Greenlee, director of the Religious Organization Project in Kentucky, told the council members who were against the ordinance that they needed to be worried about their eternal salvation for not being more tolerant.

Randy Lewis, a gay-rights ordinance

supporter, expressed outrage to the three council members opposed to the ordinance.

"YOU'RE NOT Christians, you're hateful bigots," Lewis said, prompting Hoffman to tell him to change his tone.

Resident Gary Puryear said those favoring the repeal were not bigots for standing up for their religious convictions.

The ordinance had been challenged in court by Hile and his wife, Connie. The couple were backed by Pat Robertson's American Center for Law and Justice. The Hiles claimed the ordinance forced them as landlords to violate their religious beliefs by "facilitating or supporting such a sinful lifestyle."

A judge ruled against a request by the American Civil Liberties Union to help defend the city.

The lawsuit was later dropped because the ordinance exempted single-family housing units, which the couple owned, said their attorney, Francis Manion of New Hope.