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**Same-sex benefits to go**

By ED SEALOVER - THE GAZETTE

Colorado Springs' experiment in offering same-sex benefits apparently will end at the new City Council's first meeting Tuesday.

Mayor Lionel Rivera put a resolution on the agenda directing the hospital and utility directors and the city manager not to include the benefits in their 2004 budget proposals.

The few people who signed up for the program will continue getting insurance coverage this year but not after Dec. 31.

The action comes so swiftly, Rivera and several officials said Wednesday, because there is near-unanimous agreement among council members who want to follow through on a campaign pledge and then tackle more big-picture issues.

"In all honesty I think we have more important things to get on the agenda, so let's get this over with and get onto other things," said new Councilman Jerry Heimlicher.

The council extended health benefits to homosexual partners of city workers in December on a contentious 5-4 vote. Backers said it was the right thing to do and that the estimated cost — \$58,000 — was just a fraction of the \$217 million city budget.

Many citizens reacted angrily, however, and the vote became one of the biggest issues in the recent campaign. Six of the seven council members elected April 1 pledged to eliminate the program, joining two holdovers who voted against it.

So far, only five city workers and two hospital employees signed up for the benefits. City human resources director Ann Crossey said they are costing taxpayers \$6,700.

The nonbinding resolution is meant to send a message as budget preparations begin within a month that things are going to change, Rivera said. He has said he opposes the benefits because the majority of citizens don't support them.

Councilman Tom Gallagher said he also hopes that by eliminating even this small amount from the budget, it reminds department heads about the city's grim 2004 financial situation.

"The purpose of the resolution is to give instruction that some things just aren't going to be funded, so don't ask for them," Gallagher said.

Council members turned some heads when they approved the benefits. Just a decade before, Colorado Springs earned a national reputation for conservatism by being the birthplace of the anti-gay rights Amendment 2, which would have barred laws protecting gays and lesbians from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. It was ruled unconstitutional.

Two of the supporters of same-sex benefits, however, lost in the mayor's race; one was term-limited off the council; and another chose not to seek re-election. Among members of the new council, only Richard Skorman wants to keep the benefits.

Citizens Project director Greg Borom said his voter-education organization will take people to talk to the council Tuesday in hopes of

changing some minds.

Borom argued such benefits help businesses like the city government attract a wider range of qualified job candidates. By taking such a swift hatchet to a liberal program, the Springs could suffer a black eye in some people's minds, he said.

"I think Colorado Springs has struggled in some ways to move beyond the perception that it's ... a city of hate," Borom said. "This action this quickly doesn't work toward the city's efforts to remove that image."

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