



Gay leadership summit to proceed

August 24, 2006

By Tom Mitsoff  
Post Contributor

What do you do when you schedule training for a battle that that doesn't happen?

**The Cincinnati-based Citizens to Restore Fairness and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force will let the training proceed as scheduled.**

Gay rights proponents are gathering today at the University of Cincinnati's Tangeman Center for a four-day leadership summit designed to "build the political power of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community from the ground up," according to a prepared statement.

The summit, expected to draw 60 to 70 people mostly from Ohio, was scheduled in anticipation of an election battle this year with the Equal Rights Not Special Rights organization.

That local group - which believes that ordinances enacting special protections for individuals based on their sexual orientation are unconstitutional - spearheaded a petition drive to force a referendum on whether gays should be protected against discrimination in employment and housing under the city of Cincinnati's human rights ordinance.

But last week, the petitions were withdrawn when it was discovered that some of the signatures were forged or altered.

With the referendum challenge concluded, City Council's March vote to put gays back on the list of protected people in the city charter can take effect.

"We've actually been planning this (summit) for some time," said Gary Wright, campaign chair for Citizens to Restore Fairness. "But even with what's happened, this event is just as important as ever."

Phil Burress, chairman of Equal Rights Not Special Rights, said Wednesday that he wasn't aware of the leadership summit.

"It's a free country," he said. "As long as they're not trying to force their sexuality on anyone, they're well within their rights."

Door-to-door visits in Cincinnati city neighborhoods by summit participants are part of the weekend agenda, Wright said.

"It gives us a chance to talk one-on-one with people about discrimination against gays and lesbians," he said. "Not only do we talk, but we listen very carefully to what people say so we understand what they are thinking."

Home visits are not planned in Northern Kentucky, Wright said, but some of the summit participants are from south of the river.

Goals for a successful summit, Wright said, include 300 to 400 home visits, funds raised to help causes that promote "full equality," and "a set of people with outstanding grass-roots organizational skills."

Wright said grass-roots communication is the most effective way to "directly and honestly combat the media-fed lies that people hear. It's very important to continue to do that. We typically face opposition that is well-funded and able to spend millions of dollars to crowd the airwaves with their messages."

Last week's decision to withdraw the referendum petitions remains unchanged, Burress said. Equal Rights Not Special Rights had collected 7,656 signatures, just two more than the minimum needed to force the referendum election. Attorneys for Citizens to Restore Fairness were preparing to argue that as many as 1,300 of the signatures were invalid.

"It's a dead issue," Burress said of the referendum effort. "But if that (charter) amendment is in any way used to discriminate, we'll be back trying to get it repealed."