

# The Times-Picayune

## Gay marriage amendment riles conventioners

by Jaquetta White, The Times-Picayune  
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The American Political Science Association is considering relocating its 2012 annual conference from New Orleans because of a state law concerning gay marriage and same-sex partner recognition.

The association's board will meet late next month to discuss whether to move the four-day event to another city.

At issue is the 2004 "defense of marriage" amendment to the state constitution that denies legal status to common law relationships, domestic partnerships and civil unions between gay and heterosexual couples.

Some of the group's members, led by Daniel Pinello, a political science professor at John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York, say that the amendment is a civil rights violation and could put gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender members of the association in danger. As an example, he said, if a gay member were hospitalized, his partner might not have legal authority to make medical decisions for him.

"If I were to attend the meeting, I would be subject to that hostile state law," said Pinello, who has been in a same-sex relationship for 13 years. "The only thing my partner and I can be in New Orleans is total legal strangers to one another."

Not all of the association's members agree with Pinello's position. In a letter addressed to the president of the association, 13 members of Tulane University's political science department decried the suggestion that the conference be moved. The professors said they "would seriously reconsider" their participation in future APSA events, and perhaps even their status as members, should the New Orleans event be canceled.

Mark Vail, an assistant professor at Tulane, called Pinello's argument about health care "at best, overblown." Vail said there is little risk of a circumstance arising that would jeopardize the members' civil rights. He added that the law leading to the amendment did not originate in New Orleans and passed here by a small margin.

"We feel that the fears expressed by Mr. Pinello really, fundamentally misunderstand what New Orleans is about," Vail said. "We think that its incredibly unfair to punish New Orleans."

Ultimately, the decision rests with the association's executive council, which will meet on June 26 in Chicago. The association has given members a place on its Web site to comment on the issue until May 30. Those comments, which will not be tabulated into an official vote, will be weighed when the council convenes, said Michael Brintall, the association's executive director.

"The comments are a way to see if there are other perspectives on the issue and also to inform us," Brintall said.

Brintall said the board will consider two issues at the meeting -- whether the organization should change its policy about where its meetings are held, and whether it should move this particular meeting out of New Orleans.

Brintall said the association would consider what, if any, obligations it has to the city. It already has several agreements with hotels here.

The only acceptable outcome is a decision to move the event, Pinello said. Should the council decide to keep the date in New Orleans, Pinello said he will organize a boycott.

The political science department of a university in California, which asked not to be named, already has said it would not attend the meeting should it be held in New Orleans.

Mary Beth Romig, a spokeswoman for the New Orleans Metropolitan Convention and Visitors Bureau, said her organization has been in touch with the political science association to assure its members that New Orleans would be welcoming to gay members of the group. The bureau has not agreed to call for a repeal of the constitutional amendment, however.

The association would bring about 7,000 people to the city and could have a potential economic impact of \$20 million, according to the visitors bureau.

"We've been vehemently working to keep the meeting here, but it's an unusual concern for us," Romig said. "We've enjoyed such a great reputation for being friendly to everyone and tolerant to anyone."

In conversations with the association's leadership, Romig said the visitors bureau has touted the city's gay friendliness. She pointed to its recent ranking as the third-best domestic city in the PlanetOut Travel Awards, which recognize travel trends in the gay and lesbian community. **She also noted that both the International Gay Rodeo Association and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force are meeting here next year.**

As it happens, the political science association's annual meeting is scheduled to overlap with Southern Decadence, the annual festival that attracts a mostly gay and lesbian crowd. But Pinello said he finds claims of the city's gay friendliness dubious given the passage of the defense of marriage amendment in 2004.

"I hear time and again that New Orleans is gay-friendly," Pinello said. "I simply don't understand what the basis of that is. To say that a street fair makes the city gay friendly is turning to the worst stereotypes of gays and lesbians. I think that's offensive."