



## Campaign now underway to save trans law

Montgomery County voters to decide fate of measure in November

JOSHUA LYNSEN

*Friday, June 13, 2008*

A campaign to preserve Montgomery County's transgender rights law has begun with backing from two national gay rights groups.

Basic Rights Montgomery aims to preserve the law that voters will either approve or reject in November. **The campaign has drawn \$20,000 donations each from the Human Rights Campaign and the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force.**

"I think there's a universal recognition that what's happening in Montgomery County is of national importance," said Dan Furmansky, a campaign leader and Equality Maryland's executive director.

"This is potentially the first time a standalone transgender civil rights law would have gone to the ballot and there's no option other than for us to preserve this law."

Passed unanimously by Montgomery County Council members last year, the law bars "discrimination in housing, employment, public accommodations, cable television service and taxicab service on the basis of gender identity."

It was set to go into effect four months ago, but was suspended after opponents collected more than 32,000 signatures to force a referendum. That effort was led by Citizens for a Responsible Government.

Equality Maryland and Lambda Legal are fighting in court to derail the referendum. A court hearing to discuss the validity of collected signatures, set for this week, did not conclude before Blade deadline.

Should the courthouse battle fail, Furmansky said, Basic Rights Montgomery would take the case directly to voters.

"We certainly recognize the need to get our efforts underway sooner rather than later," he said, "and that's why we're raising money for the campaign."

But the effort, which Furmansky said remains in its "infancy stages" while the steering committee searches for a campaign manager, could have a costly price tag.

"Certainly, we expect it will be in the hundreds of thousands," he said. "It's going to require a lot of voter engagements."

An estimated 930,800 people live in Montgomery County, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. That's more people than live in Alaska, Wyoming or South Dakota.

**Dan Hawes, the Task Force's director of organizing and training, said the campaign will target the "typically 20 to 30 percent" of voters who are undecided.**

**"Our job really is to figure out who are the voters we need to focus on in Montgomery County," he said, "and make sure those voters are with us."**

Noble said because the vote represents "the first-ever referenda that is singling out transgender people," it's crucial that the county votes to support the law.

"If we can defeat this soundly here," he said, "we can hopefully put a nail in the coffin of similar petitions springing up elsewhere in the country."

The efforts to protect Montgomery County's ordinance come after Maryland legislators failed to enact proposals this year for a similar law statewide.

Measures to bar discrimination in housing, employment and public accommodations based on gender identity were introduced by lawmakers, but made little progress and died in committee when the General Assembly adjourned.

Michelle Turner, a Citizens for a Responsible Government spokesperson, said that failing could give Montgomery County voters pause.

"When people see it's not passing at the state level," she said, "it does give them pause at the local level."

But supporters said the Montgomery County ordinance is needed and does not enact any drastic changes.

"I heard from many people who signed the petition — or were harassed to sign the petition — that it creates unisex bathrooms around the county," Furmansky said, "or simply people talked about how any man would be able to go into a women's bathroom or women's locker room."

He said neither scenario is true and, "the primary aim of the campaign will be educating people about the law and what it does and what it does not do."