



Gay-rights leaders' enthusiasm for Obama subsides

By DAVID CRARY – Dec 23, 2008

NEW YORK (AP) — Gay-rights activists remain hopeful about the Obama presidency but are now more wary after what one called a "double punch to the gut" — the choice of a pastor they consider hostile for a prime inauguration role and dashed hopes for the first openly gay Cabinet member.

Enthusiasm among gays over Barack Obama's election has deflated rapidly in the days since his inaugural organizers announced that the invocation would be delivered by the Rev. Rick Warren, a prominent pastor who backed a recent ballot measure banning same-sex marriage in his home state of California.

The Warren announcement coincided with the final round of Obama's Cabinet selections — confirming that gays on the short list for interior secretary and labor secretary would not get those posts.

"It felt like a double punch to the gut," said Denis Dison of the Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund, which supports openly gay political candidates. "People were afraid at that moment — we didn't know what it portended for the administration ahead."

Obama said Warren's selection reflected a desire for diversity at the inauguration and insisted he remained a "fierce advocate" of equal rights for gays.

That advocacy includes support for gay activists' key legislative goals: outlawing workplace discrimination based on sexual orientation, expanding the federal hate-crimes law to cover anti-gay violence, extending federal recognition to same-sex partnerships, and repealing the "don't ask, don't tell" policy that bars service members from openly acknowledging they are gay.

Gay-rights leaders said the furor over Warren might prompt the Obama administration to be more attentive to their concerns, and they will be watchful to see what develops.

"We are prepared to hold feet to the fire on the issues that are critical to our community," said Darlene Nipper, deputy executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. "It's our responsibility to stay in the face of the administration."

"We have a right to expect a great deal from people who say they're our friend," said Kevin Cathcart, executive director of the gay-rights group Lambda Legal. "Maybe this is an important wakeup call to people in the transition about the weight their actions carry."

Before last week, many gay leaders were satisfied with Obama's transition team — there were joint meetings on gay-rights priorities and complimentary remarks when a task force submitted the names of gays and lesbians to be considered for high-level political appointments.

Among the names were at least two serious contenders for Cabinet posts — John Berry, director of the National Zoo, for interior secretary, and Mary Beth Maxwell, executive director of American

Rights at Work, for labor secretary. Those posts went to other candidates, and the only openly gay person to get a high position thus far is Los Angeles deputy mayor Nancy Sutley, Obama's pick to chair the White House Council on Environmental Quality.

When the Cabinet-to-be was completed, and Warren was announced as an inaugural VIP, the high spirits were swiftly replaced by a swirl of mixed emotions. Christine Quinn, the openly gay speaker of New York's City Council, said she felt schizophrenic.

"I'm so excited about President-elect Obama — yet one day you wake up and there's this incredibly disappointing thing," she said. "We're not going to say, 'Forget it, we're done with Obama.' But it's very disappointing. There's no way to sugarcoat that or pretend it isn't the case."

The president of the largest national gay-rights group, Joe Solmonese of the Human Rights Campaign, suggested the gay community's expectations for Obama were so high that a setback was unsurprising.

"Maybe we've built this person up to a degree that we forget Barack Obama is a politician who sometimes does expedient things," Solmonese said. "We have a responsibility to express our anger and disappointment and then figure out a way to move forward."

Several activists noted that the Warren controversy had a precedent in 2007, when the Obama campaign angered gays by deploying Donnie McClurkin, a gospel singer who maintained homosexuality is a choice, at campaign concerts in South Carolina.

"You'd expect smart people to have learned from that experience," said V. Gene Robinson of New Hampshire, the first openly gay Episcopal bishop. "This wouldn't have been as powerful for us had that earlier experience not taken place — it stirs up all those feelings again."

Robinson, an Obama backer, says he was stung by Warren's selection but remains confident Obama will prove to be the most supportive president ever for gay-rights causes.

Ethan Geto, a New York-based activist who initially served as an adviser to Hillary Rodham Clinton but later joined Obama's campaign, said the president-elect is "viscerally committed" to expanding gay rights.

"It may very well be that Obama starts his administration with a heightened level of sensitivity to the gay community, because of the community's genuine distress over Rick Warren," Geto said.

Some gays and lesbians have reacted to the Warren situation in conciliatory fashion.

For example, singer-songwriter Melissa Etheridge — writing Monday in the Huffington Post — said she was impressed by Warren's warmth during a recent encounter and decided she would attend Obama's inauguration.

"Before we change minds we must change hearts," Etheridge wrote. "Maybe in our anger, as we consider marches and boycotts, perhaps we can consider stretching out our hands."

Also bound for the inauguration is a 177-member contingent representing the Lesbian and Gay Band Association — it says it will become the first gay/lesbian group ever to march in a presidential inaugural parade.

Judy Ames, a clarinet player, said she and her colleagues decided not to heed calls from activists to boycott the parade as a protest against Warren.

"Barack Obama clearly values diversity, and challenges us to do the same," she said. "We earned a spot in the parade as musicians — we feel very proud."