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Saturday Chat: Matt Foreman, National Gay and Lesbian Task Force executive director

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Sometime in the next six months, gay rights advocates expect a decision from the state Supreme Court that would, in effect, decide whether same-sex marriage is legal in Washington.

If the justices decide in favor of gay unions, Washington would join Massachusetts as the only states to grant legal standing to homosexual marriage, though lawsuits aiming for the same result are pending in New York, New Jersey and California.

Conservative backlash, however, has been strengthening. At least 10 states plan to include anti-gay marriage initiatives on their ballots in the 2006 election, said Matt Foreman, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, who spends much of his time jetting around the country, lobbying for gay rights in places such as Topeka, Kan., and Kalamazoo, Mich.

On Friday, he visited Seattle, likely the next flashpoint for a national gay rights battle.

Does the court case in Washington have any particular significance in your fight? How does this state fit into the national picture?

"Washington is going to be a pivotal state for our movement over the next year. This is a place where our community is on the offensive, and if there is a win here, there will be a huge reaction. The right wing will definitely rally their forces to try and push it back. And if it's a Vermont-style civil-unions decision, the challenge will be getting the Legislature to do the right thing and give people full equal rights, not just a shadow version of that. Any way the court decides here, the fight's not going to be over."

There was such a burst of momentum a year ago, with gay marriages being performed in Portland, San Francisco and New York. Do you see a cooling off now, a retrenchment in the face of all the subsequent prohibitions?

"The history of gay rights and marriage equity has always been two steps forward, one step back. Right now, there's forward momentum in Washington state, in New Jersey, California and New York. But at the same time, we're under increased attack. There is a tremendous amount of anti-gay organizing going on, and in some states we're not going to be able to put up much of a fight."

You often fault the gay community for talking about same-sex marriage as an equal rights issue. What bothers you so much about that?

"We have sanitized and intellectualized our cause to the point of abstraction. Our argument is always about -- you know, you get a better dental plan if you're married. Stuff like that. But marriage is just a code word. The fight is really: Are we equal humans in society or not? The right wing goes for the gut and we respond in this completely sterile way, talking about academic issues like the 1,038 rights that are denied us. It's kind of like John Kerry in the presidential race."

Are you saying that anyone uncomfortable with the idea of gay marriage is a bigot?

"No, I completely understand. People are raised -- especially women -- with the idea of 'This is my special day,' 'my Prince Charming.' Even among women 35 to 50, who have always been among our strongest supporters, their numbers fall on the gay marriage issue. ... But I do a lot of door-to-door lobbying and I've found that if you can speak to someone honestly about this for 90 seconds, they get past that visceral reaction. Most people, actually, are hungry to talk about it. It's not like they're slamming the door in your face."

Washington is perceived, rightly or wrongly, as a liberal stronghold, so if the court decision here goes against gay marriage, would that be sort of a punch in the gut?

"I think it will bring much more disappointment than if that decision occurred in 35 other states, particularly because this court has a reputation for being fair. So yes, I think it will hurt a lot."