

Recent state issues energize gay political groups here

By Jo Mannies
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MOST OF THE 15 young men mingling around the bar at the Central West End restaurant on a recent Friday night fit the bill for the typical conservative Republican.

Many were outspoken supporters of lower taxes and less government. Several - like Albert Anglin and Andy Buhr - made a point of emphasizing their staunch opposition to abortion and euthanasia.

Anglin added that he voted for President George W. Bush last fall "with great joy and pride."

Only one thing set the group apart from most of the Republicans advancing similar views around the state.

These guys are gay.

They're members of the Log Cabin Republicans of Greater St. Louis, the local arm of the GOP's national group for gays and lesbians. After being dormant for a while, the local group is being rekindled.

(Log Cabin Republicans should not be confused with the region's Log Cabin Club. The latter is a Ladue-based organization of some of the region's most prominent figures, many of whom are Republicans. Sexual orientation has nothing to do with club membership.)

Charles Stadtlander, the local Log Cabin Republicans' new president, estimates that it has roughly 200-250 members around the state, most of them in the St. Louis area.

A Democratic group for gays and lesbians, called the Stonewall Democrats, also is being organized in the region.

Perry Nelson, vice president for the new Democratic group, said many of the members got politically active last summer during the statewide battle over the proposed constitutional amendment defining marriage as only between a man and a woman. Most gay-rights groups actively campaigned against the measure, which ended up being approved last August by almost 71 percent of Missouri voters.

Stadtlander, 25, says he wasn't upset by the vote. He asserted that's also true of many fellow Log Cabin Republicans. "We're not really concerned about the gay-marriage issue," Stadtlander said. "We're more concerned about equal rights."

In fact, he added, "most gays and lesbians have conservative family values."

But, Stadtlander concedes, that point sometimes can be a hard sell, especially within his own party. The final days of this year's legislative session in Jefferson City, for example, featured a Republican-led effort to bar public school districts from allowing students to form gay support clubs.

The House voted 81-47 to ban the clubs, but that provision later died for procedural reasons. Backers of the ban said the clubs were improper, given the state's ban on gay marriage. Opponents said the clubs helped counter harassment and assault against gay students.

Among those voting in favor of the ban was House Speaker Pro Tem Carl Bearden, R-St. Charles. On this particular Friday night, he also was at the bar as the

featured speaker for the Log Cabin group.

Bearden's remarks focused largely on the various financial issues facing the strapped state, and he allowed later that he was somewhat stunned that most of the audience's questions were in a similar vein. Anti-tax, pro-states' rights, pro-school vouchers.

But at some point, the queries shifted to gay rights. And Bearden didn't flinch. He said he supported equal rights for everyone but opposed any sort of legislation seen as granting special protections to homosexuals or any other group.

In light of the overwhelming vote last August, Bearden predicted that it would be years, at least, before the Legislature would entertain any proposal to allow civil unions.

In response, Stadlander said he was disturbed that President George W. Bush had focused so much attention in his presidential campaign last fall on gay marriage. Most gays, Stadlander asserted, weren't interested in marriage; they just want privacy.

Later, Stadlander said that the Log Cabin chapter's biggest opposition was from others among gay residents who want the group to be more militant when it comes to gay rights. At this point, Stadlander said, his aim was simply to forge civil relationships with state Republican leaders.

Next week, for example, the featured speaker will be state Rep. Jack Jackson, R-Wildwood, who's running for state auditor.

Like Bearden, Jackson said he wasn't condoning the gay lifestyle. Both men said their presence was in recognition that Log Cabin Republicans shared the same core issues as their straight brothers and sisters in the GOP.

Local consultant Paul Zemitzsch quipped that he would be surprised if the statewide images of Bearden or Jackson were hurt by their appearances at the gay gatherings.

"I doubt that many rural Republicans even know who the Log Cabin Republicans are," Zemitzsch said. "They probably think they are Lincoln re-enactors."

Or they may confuse the group with that prestigious club in Ladue.

Reporter Jo Mannies
E-mail: jmannies@post-dispatch.com
Phone: 314-340-8334