

Gays plan protest of marriage ban today

By Jo Mannies
Post-Dispatch Political Correspondent
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After a romantic proposal last week, the couple plans to show up at the St. Louis courthouse today to get married.

But Tim Coleman and Erick Semenske are prepared to be turned away.

They're among some gay and lesbian couples from around Missouri who are planning to apply for marriage licenses today in what organizers call "a peaceful protest" marking the one-year anniversary of the passage of the state constitutional amendment banning gay marriage.

"It's couples quietly going in to apply for marriage licenses, and being turned down," said Semenske, the St. Louis coordinator for the event. The protest involves several gay-rights groups, including Show Me Equality.

The aim of the protest, Semenske said, is to "put a face" on the people affected by last year's passage of Amendment 2, which defined marriage in Missouri as only between a man and a woman.

"We're committed couples. We want the same recognition that heterosexual couples enjoy. We don't want to devalue marriage, we want to enhance it," Semenske added.

Backers of the ban say it's clear that most Missourians disagree. After winning overwhelming support in the Legislature, the measure was supported by almost three-quarters of Missouri's voters last August.

A spokesman for Gov. Matt Blunt emphasized Tuesday that he "is and has been a strong supporter of Missouri's marriage-protection amendment."

State Rep. Jim Lembke, R-Mehlville, among the co-sponsors in the House, said state officials and most voters share the view that heterosexual marriage is "the foundation of Western civilization."

Lembke added, though, that opponents had every right to peacefully protest against it.

Still, the St. Louis chapter of Log Cabin Republicans, a gay group, contends that today's protest will only hurt the cause of gay rights. "This is an unproductive and negative tactic that does nothing more than drive hate and resentment among Missourians toward the gay and lesbian community," said chapter President Charles Stadlander.

Stadlander called for the protesters to focus instead on efforts to push legislation next session that allows civil unions and protects gays against various types of discrimination.

The most prominent statewide gay-rights group, PROMO, said in a statement Tuesday that its members planned to press for such measures. Executive Director Julie Brueggeman said there was particular concern that the Legislature might pass new measures banning same-sex couples from adopting children or acting as foster parents.

Brueggeman added that PROMO supported the general aim of today's protest. Most of the applications for marriage licenses are expected to primarily take place in the late morning in Columbia, Mo., Kansas City and St. Louis and surrounding suburbs. In St. Louis, participants plan to hold rallies in Tower Grove Park before and after they make their courthouse stops.

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