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Florida County Ending Official Support of Gay Events

By LYNN WADDELL
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TAMPA, Fla., June 25 - It started with a few complaints about a public library exhibit on gay authors, and resulted in an ordinance that has drawn the ire of gay rights advocates around the nation.

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The Hillsborough County Commission approved by a vote of 5 to 1, with one abstention, a policy that directs the county government to "abstain from acknowledging, promoting or

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participating" in gay pride recognition or events. The measure was passed on June 15, after a Gay and Lesbian Pride Month display at the West Gate Regional Library here upset some library patrons.

The commission also voted to require a supermajority vote of 5 to 2 to overturn the policy.

Meagan Albright, a graduate student at the University of South Florida, created the exhibit on gay authors and literature to fulfill a requirement for a course on diversity. As part of the exhibit, Ms. Albright made available pamphlets that listed counseling resources for teenagers who have questions about their sexuality.

Commissioner Ronda Storms, who introduced the measure and has received the brunt of local criticism about it, said the pamphlet troubled her the most.

"One of the things that occurred was that pamphlets were being distributed to children by librarians who are county employees," Ms. Storms said, "and they referred children to youth groups outside Hillsborough County to explore their sexuality."

Doing so, she said, could lead the children to engage in "high-risk behavior."

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Hector Vargas, southern regional director of Lambda Legal, a gay civil rights group, said it was not the first time that a local government had sought to adopt an anti-gay policy. But he said it might be the first time in recent years that one so broad had succeeded.

"Many have tried and failed," Mr. Vargas said. "Typically we've seen these types of policies in the private sector."

The county's policy has angered gay rights advocates across the country.

"From a national perspective we haven't seen anything like this," said Paul Cates, the American Civil Liberties Union's director of public education for lesbian and gay rights.

Community leaders here said the policy damaged recent efforts to promote the Tampa region as being multicultural and diverse. Addressing an arts group the day after the commission's vote, Mayor Pam Iorio of Tampa said: "Gays and lesbians are part of our diversity and deserve our respect. That is a value that I hold dear. We should build on tolerance, not intolerance."

On Monday night, more than 700 people met at the Metropolitan Community Church of Tampa to discuss ways to get the policy overturned.

"I've been with my partner for three years and this is a small step to push us farther and farther back," said Jeff Isaacson, 40, who attended the rally. "It's the library now, but it could be more later. We're here to stop the bleeding and show we are here."

While the measure is not popular with gay rights supporters, Renee Lee, the Hillsborough County attorney, said it was legal. "If the county doesn't want to spend money promoting gay rights, they can do that," Ms. Lee said. "It's not a constitutional breach. This is not a free speech issue."

Opponents of the policy have organized a gay pride parade through Tampa on Sunday that will end at a county park. Equality Florida, the group organizing the parade, has received a county permit. Rochelle Reback, a lawyer who has fought the county's policies on gay rights, said she saw that as a sign the county would not enforce the policy.

Linda Alexander, the University of South Florida professor who teaches the diversity class, said she saw more at risk than the Tampa area's reputation.

"My thing is the intellectual freedom part," Mrs. Alexander said. "Libraries are supposed to be a place to learn and explore things."

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