

New effort to win marriage underway in Md.

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Del. Mary Washington (center), a lesbian member of the Maryland House of Delegates, announced plans for a new marriage bill at a news conference Tuesday. At left is Baltimore Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake. (Washington Blade photo)

BALTIMORE — A diverse coalition of organizations announced plans Tuesday to push for a same-sex marriage bill in Maryland during the 2012 legislative session, which begins in January.

Led by Progressive Maryland, the coalition is dubbed Marylanders for Marriage Equality and includes Equality Maryland, the Human Rights Campaign, ACLU, Service Employees International Union 1199, Maryland Catholics for Equality and a number of other religious organizations.

Coalition members gathered at a sweltering morning news conference in front of Baltimore's City Hall to announce their plans, just weeks after New York's legislature approved a marriage equality measure.

"I believe in equality for all Baltimoreans," said Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake. "Baltimore will continue to stand with you in Annapolis."

Sen. Rich Madaleno (D-Mont. Co.), when asked by the Washington Blade whether the coalition would consider a civil unions bill in lieu of marriage in the event of a referendum threat, said unequivocally that civil unions are an unacceptable compromise.

"It is marriage and only marriage — we are not considering a civil unions bill," said Madaleno, the only openly gay member of the state Senate. "We will win a referendum if it gets that far."

Gov. Martin O'Malley did not attend the news conference, but has said since 2007 that he would sign a marriage equality bill if the legislature can pass it. Del. Maggie McIntosh, a lesbian and the most senior member of the LGBT Caucus in the House of Delegates, said the coalition is in talks with O'Malley about taking a more visible and public role in advocating for the bill. O'Malley was criticized by some marriage rights supporters earlier this year for his perceived lack of visibility on the issue, which comes in stark contrast to New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, who is widely credited with championing the issue in the Empire State.

McIntosh said marriage equality supporters have asked O'Malley to include the bill in the administration's 2012 legislative package and that an answer on that request could come within weeks.

"The governor and the delegates have had discussions about this recently," O'Malley spokesperson Raquel Guillory told the Blade after the news conference. "He is supportive of the new push and we are reaching out to a broad coalition of folks and discussing what steps we take next."

Guillory didn't say whether O'Malley would include the marriage bill in his administrative package.



“The governor was very clear last year that he would sign a marriage bill if it crossed his desk and that position has not changed,” she said. “He remains supportive.”

Asked why O’Malley didn’t attend today’s news conference, Guillory said, “This was an event organized by the delegates and [Rich] Madaleno — this was their event, it wasn’t the governor’s announcement.”

She added that the difference between the successful New York effort and the very visible role Cuomo played in it and O’Malley’s approach to the issue is merely a matter of style.

“You’re focusing on one issue,” she said, “you need to look at the personalities of the individuals. [Cuomo] is not much more out there [on marriage], he’s more vocal about everything, it’s a matter of style.”

She added that O’Malley “did a lot behind the scenes to work this bill,” and that taking Cuomo’s approach “doesn’t ensure passage.”

A marriage equality bill failed in the House of Delegates in March after the Senate approved it. Multiple factors were cited for its failure, including opposition from conservative black pastors in Prince George’s County and a vigorous and well-funded campaign by the anti-gay National Organization for Marriage to derail the bill.

But supporters noted that they had little time to plan last year, because the bill was bottled up in committee until a sudden reshuffling of committee assignments in December resulted in its Senate passage.

“I’m incredibly optimistic this time,” said lesbian Del. Heather Mizeur (D-Mont. Co.). “Last year, we were caught off guard; this year we have more time to plan.”

Responding to speculation that the bill could be introduced at a special October legislative session on redistricting, Mizeur said that the bill would most likely be considered in January.

Guillory said the focus of the October special session would be on redistricting. “Other options could be put on the table, but our focus is to take care of the redistricting issue,” she said.

Del. Peter Murphy (D-Charles Co.), who came out in an earlier interview with the Blade, echoed Mizeur’s confidence.

“I’m very optimistic,” Murphy said, “there is a tremendous effort and organization behind this and I’m confident the citizens of Maryland will support it.”

Rion Dennis, executive director of Progressive Maryland, vowed Maryland would become the nation’s seventh state to enact marriage equality. His group is leading the marriage coalition. Sultan Shakir, an HRC employee who was loaned to Equality Maryland during the legislative session to work on marriage, is now working with Progressive Maryland.

Equality Maryland fired its executive director after the 2011 legislative session and its board chair later resigned. The group has been plagued by financial and staffing problems, but one board member said Tuesday things are turning around.

“We have a six-month plan in place and are back on sound financial footing,” said Equality Maryland board member Mark Yost. “We look forward to working with the coalition to bring marriage to all Marylanders.”

Yost said Equality Maryland is planning to hire a new executive director but declined to say when that would occur.

In addition to politicians and activists, the Tuesday news conference highlighted the plight of two lesbian couples from Maryland. Kalima Young and Francine Housier joined Chris Megargee and Barbara McKeefery in addressing the media and taking about the importance of marriage equality to them and their families.

<http://www.washingtonblade.com/2011/07/12/today-coalition-to-launch-maryland-marriage-campaign/>