

General Assembly taking up gay marriage issue

Civil unions proposal also expected to be considered

January 21, 2011|By Julie Bykowicz, The Baltimore Sun

Just days into the legislative session, Democratic lawmakers have put together several bills to legalize same-sex unions — ensuring that the topic will see debate in the General Assembly this year.

Maryland law defines marriage as between a man and a woman. Lawmakers have attempted to rewrite the law for years; gay-rights advocates and legislative leaders say some form of gay marriage or civil union legislation is likely to pass this year. The Senate has added two Democrats, and at least two new openly gay members were elected to the House of Delegates.

On Friday, Senate Majority Leader Rob Garagiola of Montgomery County introduced the Religious Freedom and Civil Marriage Protection Act, the preferred plan of gay-rights activists. The legislation would permit same-sex couples to marry but would not require churches to perform the ceremonies.

The House version of that bill is scheduled to be introduced next week by House Majority Leader Kumar Barve of Montgomery County. Legislative leaders, the gay-rights group Equality Maryland and same-sex couples will promote the legislation at a news conference Tuesday in Annapolis.

Del. Luiz R.S. Simmons has also introduced a gay marriage bill. The Montgomery County Democrat sits on the House Judiciary Committee, which will hear testimony on all the marriage legislation.

Opponents are preparing for the debate, as well. On Friday, Del. Don H. Dwyer Jr. was talking to colleagues about a bill he plans to introduce to block Maryland's new policy of extending marriage protections to same-sex unions that were lawfully performed in other jurisdictions.

The Anne Arundel County Republican was the leading opponent of the legal opinion produced by Maryland Attorney General Douglas F. Gansler last year saying that the state should recognize out-of-state unions.

Dwyer's legislation would establish that marriage between a man and a woman is the only legally valid union in Maryland.

The most vocal supporter this year of civil unions has been Sen. Allan H. Kittleman, a Howard County Republican — and, until Friday, the Senate minority leader. Kittleman said he believes that gay and straight couples alike should be able to enter civil contracts that solidify their partnerships. He resigned his leadership position this week when it became clear that the 11 other Senate Republicans do not share his view.

Gay-rights activists have praised Kittleman's proposal as a step in the right direction. But civil unions fall short of full equality for same-sex couples, they say, because they are treated differently from straight couples.