

Testimony Of Thomas M. Smith
Chair, Ward Three Democratic Committee
Before
Council of the District of Columbia
Committee on Public Safety and the Judiciary
On
Bill 18-482: Religious Freedom and Civil Marriage Equality Amendment Act
of 2009
October 26, 2009

Thank you for the opportunity to make this brief statement today on an important issue for DC residents and future generations of DC residents. I am here today on behalf of the Ward Three Democratic Committee to testify in support of Bill 18-482, the Religious Freedom and Civil Marriage Equality Amendment Act of 2009.

The Ward Three Democratic Committee is the official grassroots arm of the Democratic Party for residents of Washington, D.C. living and registered to vote in Ward 3. The Ward Three Democratic Committee is chartered by the Democratic National Committee (DNC) and the District of Columbia Democratic State Committee (DCDSC). The Committee has a dual mission:

- To support and elect Democratic candidates for local and national office; and
- To serve as an issues forum for the community and Democratic voters in Ward 3.

By educating the city's voters on key issues, the Ward Three Democratic Committee seeks to improve the lives of DC residents and raise the level of debate in the nation's capital on both local and national issues.

As a 28-year member and now chair of the Ward Three Democratic Committee, I am proud that our committee voted **unanimously** on June 18 to support marriage equality in DC. The resolution approved by the committee made the following points:

- Marriage offers many legal benefits and responsibilities that protect families;
- Marriage is a basic human right and an individual choice; and
- The state should not interfere with same gender couples who choose to marry and share fully and equally in the rights, responsibilities, and commitment of civil marriage.

The Committee also voted to encourage the DC Council to enact legislation to provide for marriage equality in the District of Columbia and to call on the Mayor to sign such legislation upon Council approval.

We applaud the introduction of the long overdue Religious Freedom and Civil Marriage Equality Amendment Act of 2009; and we encourage its swift passage by the DC Council.

The strong support for this resolution among Ward Three Democratic Committee political activists reflects strong consensus that the time is long overdue for the government of the District of Columbia to stand up for civil marriage for same sex couples. As a political organization, we understand that the congressional review process may have been a disincentive for acting sooner on this issue. In fact, frustration with the lack of political autonomy for DC has prompted our Committee also to fully embrace DC statehood.

We recognize that there will be some in Congress who will use passage of the Religious Freedom and Civil Marriage Equality Amendment Act of 2009 by the DC Council to again demonize the District government and its residents for political purposes. So be it! This is a time for leadership on this issue. Our political leadership in the District of Columbia should never be reluctant to bear the burden of fighting back against hatred – even if its origins are in the U.S. Congress or any other federal agency – and especially when the DC government seeks to extend rights that have been unjustly denied to our residents or to a group of our residents.

Thank you for having the courage to stand up for what is right.

By taking this issue up, this Council is sending a powerful message of hope, but not just to other local and state governments. You also are sending a message of hope to millions of young gay men and lesbians in communities – rural and urban – across this nation.

Do not underestimate how your actions will give hope to so many young people across this country. Passage of this legislation will give them:

- Hope that they can focus on living their lives openly without fear of violence;
- Hope that they will have access to the same civil institutions available to others but denied them only because of the person with whom they seek to share their lives;
- Hope that one more social stigma associated with being gay or lesbian will be relegated to the history books; and
- Hope that all communities may one day fully recognize and embrace the concept that love and marriage go together – not just for some – but for all.

There are many reasons why this Council should approve this legislation. But, first and foremost, it is the right and just thing to do. Thank you.