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Foes of gay rights ordinance plan campaign for referendum

By Linda Goldston
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Vowing a "one-day petition drive," opponents of Santa Clara County's recently adopted ordinance banning discrimination against gays have launched a drive to keep the law from going into effect Sept. 5.

The group, spearheaded by the Committee of Concerned Citizens, has fewer than 30 days to collect the more than 37,000 signatures needed to force a referendum election before

the ordinance becomes effective.

"I fully expect to come up with 50,000 to 55,000 signatures in one day," said Rick Harrington, chairman of the committee. "I'm really inclined to think we'll have double that."

However, supporters of the ordinance and gay spokespersons said Thursday they believed the effort would fail.

"It won't come to the point of a referendum but if it does, it will lose," said David Steward, chairman of the

county Human Relations Commission.

Harrington said 2,500 people have been organized to lead the petition drive in the county but declined to say when the petition would be circulated.

"The opposition can organize and through a variety of methods attempt to prevent or at least slow down the petition drive," said Harrington. "I want to avoid as much of that as possible until just before or during the drive."

The ordinance, approved by super-

visors Monday after more than 25 hours of public testimony, would ban discrimination based on sexual orientation in housing, employment, business, real estate transactions and access to government services.

However, Harrington charged the ordinance allows "homosexuals to gain a status of recognition of being a legitimate minority group that's being discriminated against."

"We don't feel they are a legitimate minority group because their identifi-

cation is based on their behavior, which is something that is controllable," he said.

Johnie Staggs, who is head of Lambda Association, a gay community organization, denied the ordinance gives special rights to gays. "The whole point is that we want to be judged on our ability to pay our rent and to do our jobs well."

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Gay rights foes seek signatures

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She said the defeat of Proposition 6, an anti-gay initiative voted down statewide and in the county last November, is proof the push to suspend the county's ordinance will fail.

"The county had a higher percentage against Proposition 6 than the whole state," she said.

George Mann, county registrar of voters, said 37,092 validated signatures will be required to suspend the ordinance. It would then be referred back to the board of supervisors, which could vote to rescind the ordinance or place the issue on the ballot in a special election or in the next regular election.

(The number of signatures is based on 10 percent of the total vote by county voters for all candidates for governor in last year's election.)

However, "it couldn't be on the November ballot," he said. "There's no way we could get the signatures checked in time."

The ordinance would be suspended until after the referendum if enough signatures are gathered.

Board of supervisors Chairman Dom Cortese, who cast the losing vote in the board's 4-1 approval of the ordinance, said he would prefer to rescind the measure if the petition drive is successful.

However, Supervisors Rod Diridon and Susanne Wilson said they would place the issue before voters. Other supervisors could not be reached for comment.

If the referendum fails or not enough signatures are collected, Harrington said the Committee of Concerned Citizens will attempt an initiative drive to weaken the ordinance.

"The committee isn't accepting contributions right now but we've gotten a lot of pledges," he said. "If this thing goes to a full-blown campaign, it will require hundreds of thousands of dollars."

He said the committee was formed this year to lobby against the ordinance and is broad-based, countering the claims by many that the opposition is primarily from fundamentalist church groups.

"We would be lucky if our membership was 50-50 (50 percent church people)," he said.

Harrington said the committee has a mailing list of 35,000 persons comprised of "church people," businessmen and interested citizens.

The Santa Clara County Manufacturing Group opposed the gay rights ordinance before it was approved by the supervisors. Its president, Peter B. Giles, however, could not be reached for comment on whether it would support the referendum attempt.

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