Alabama Senate OK’s Restriction
On Gay Groups

BY JOHN GALLAGHER

The Alabama legislature increased the stakes in the statewide debate over official recognition of gay student groups April 30, when the state senate unanimously approved a measure that would bar the groups from receiving state funds or using campus buildings.

The measure had already been approved by the state house of representatives, and it was sent to Gov. Guy Hunt, who was said by his spokesman Terry Abbott to be ready to sign the bill into law.

“It sounds like the Alabama state legislature is off on a homophobic romp,” said William Rubenstein, director of the Lesbian and Gay Rights Project of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). Rubenstein is representing the Auburn Gay and Lesbian Association (AGLA), a gay student group at Auburn University in Auburn.

Indeed, some activists found even the tone of the debate on the measure objectionable. State senator Bobby Denton teased his colleagues by affecting an effeminate voice to say “I urge you to vote no,” and several senators responded in kind by using deep voices when casting their votes.

The uproar over gay student groups began last fall, when Auburn’s student senate, the Student Government Association (SGA), voted to deny a charter to AGLA, arguing that the group advocated violation of the state’s sodomy law. Possession of the charter allows the group to use campus facilities and allows it to apply for university funding. School administrators then overruled the SGA decision and granted the charter to the gay group.

State politicians then moved quickly to vehemently denounce AGLA, and state attorney general Jimmy Evans issued a legal opinion saying that the state should not fund gay groups. The dispute eventually spread to the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, where student government officials cited Evans’s opinion when they voted in March to cut their appropriation for the Alabama Gay Lesbian Alliance, a gay student group. The funding was later restored.

After the state senate approved the ban on state support for gay student groups, several legislators congratulated student representatives from Auburn and the University of Alabama who had lobbied for the measure.

Pat Seton, who was elected president of the Auburn SGA in April, said that Auburn and Alabama were united in their opposition to the gay student groups. “We usually fight it out on the football field, but we worked together for righteousness,” he said.

Rubenstein said that any effort to prevent the gay student groups from meeting would be unconstitutional. “If the state universities try to use the law against any of the groups, we would take their case and try to have the law struck down,” Rubenstein said. He said that the ACLU may also consider challenging the law before it is applied to any of the student groups.

ACLU attorney William Rubenstein
He expects to challenge the law in court.

Sex-Education Bill Passes Alabama House

The same day that the Alabama senate approved the measure forbidding support for gay student groups, the state house of representatives voted 89-15 to approve a measure that would require sex-education courses in public schools to emphasize that homosexuality is “not a lifestyle acceptable to the general public” and remind students that same-sex intercourse is a criminal offense under state law.

The bill would also require teachers to stress that sexual abstinence is the expected standard for unmarried teenagers.

The state senate had already approved the measure, but because of a procedural vote, the measure was returned to a senate committee, where it was to be considered for inclusion on a list of last-minute bills to be sent to Gov. Guy Hunt.

Syble Brindley, chairwoman of the Alabama Coalition for School Health, an organization of parent and health groups, said her group was reluctant to attack the measure’s antigay provisions because of the inflammatory nature of the debate surrounding state recognition of gay student groups.

Strong support for the bill came from the Eagle Forum, a nationwide right-wing women’s group, Brindley said. “Most of these ladies live in the high socioeconomic community,” she said. “None of them work. They sit in the halls of the legislature every day it meets.”

If the bill reaches Hunt’s desk, it is almost sure to become law, Brindley said. “It’s a Baptist preacher who’s a fundamentalist Republican,” she said. “He definitely will sign it.”