

New Jersey lawmakers OK gay civil unions: Follow state Supreme Court ruling

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State lawmakers voted in mid-December to make New Jersey the third state in the nation to allow gay couples to form civil unions with all the rights and responsibilities of married couples.

The historic votes by both houses of the state legislature came just 50 days after the state Supreme Court declared that New Jersey's constitution requires equality for same-sex couples and gave lawmakers six months to enact change.

The bill amending New Jersey's 1912 marriage law was adopted over the objections of social conservatives—who said it threatens the sanctity of marriage and who railed against judicial activism—as well as of gay-rights activists, who said they would continue to push for the right to marry. The court had left it to the legislature to decide whether to use the term *marriage*.

The bill passed 56-19 in the Assembly and 23-12 in the Senate. Five members abstained in each house.

"Today, the people of the state of New Jersey, through us, proclaim the dignity of all relationships," said Assembly member Wilfredo Caraballo, a Democrat who sponsored the bill. The measure, he said, is "nothing short of recognizing [that] love matters."

Civil unions would give gay couples all the rights and obligations of their heterosexual counterparts—everything from the right to prenuptial agreements to equal application of adoption, child support and alimony laws.

Governor Jon Corzine commended lawmakers for their swift action and said he would sign the bill once his staff ensured that it complies with the Supreme Court ruling. The law would go into effect 60 days after it is signed. "I've been for civil unions for

a long time," Corzine said.

The governor said it's possible that civil unions could evolve into gay marriage, but stressed that it's important not to "get so far out in front of the public that we're not dealing with general society's belief."

Massachusetts is the only state in the nation that allows gay marriage. Connecticut and Vermont allow civil unions. California has a strong domestic partnership law that provides most of the rights of civil unions.

Assembly member Ronald Dancer, a Republican, said his personal faith prevented him from supporting the bill. "I cannot compromise my religious beliefs and faith," Dancer said. "Let marriage be known by no other name, nor let marriage ever be redefined." *-Religion News Service*