

# Nevada on path to repeal gay marriage ban

By Anjeanette Damon, Las Vegas Sun

CARSON CITY – Following more than an hour of riveting and personal floor speeches – during which one state senator publicly announced for the first time he is gay – the Nevada Senate voted 12-9 to begin the process of repealing the gay marriage ban from the state Constitution.

Only one Republican, Sen. Ben Kieckhefer, joined with Democrats to vote in favor of Senate Joint Resolution 13, which would repeal the ban on gay marriage and replace it with a requirement that the state recognize all marriages regardless of gender.

The late night vote came after more than an hour of emotional floor debate, during which opponents of the measure decried efforts to label them as “insensitive and unenlightened,” and supporters argued marriage equality should be extended to all regardless of gender.

In a particularly emotional moment, Sen. Kelvin Atkinson, D-North Las Vegas, publicly declared for the first time that he is gay.

“I’m black. I’m gay,” Atkinson said in a trembling voice after describing his father’s interracial re-marriage that would have been banned earlier in American history. “I know this is the first time many of you have heard me say that I am a black, gay male.”

Atkinson went on to rebut the argument that gay marriage threatens any other definition of marriage.

“If this hurts your marriage, then your marriage was in

trouble in the first place," he said.

Both Democrats and Republicans sought to balance religious convictions with their stance on public policy. Both came down on different sides of the issue.

"I don't know if I'll be allowed in church on Sunday," said Sen. Ruben Kihuen, a Catholic, who said his "more progressive" girlfriend often berated him for resisting gay marriage rights. He ultimately voted in favor of SJR13.

Sen. Justin Jones, a Mormon, said he sees his gay brother-in-law each Sunday at church and couldn't bring himself to vote against extending him marriage rights despite a threat from one of the earliest proponents of the gay marriage ban.

"I would rather lose an election than look my brother-in-law in the eye every Sunday and tell him he doesn't have the same rights as I do," Jones said.

Sen. Joe Hardy, also a Mormon, took a different tact, saying marriage is "ordained of God" and that such relationships "perpetuate beyond the grave."

"I do not believe this measure will strengthen the family as the fundamental unit of society," he said.

Sen. Mark Hutchison, also a Mormon, decried efforts to paint those who oppose gay marriage as intolerant.

"Until about a year ago this was the view of the president of the United States," Hutchison said of President Obama's initial opposition to gay marriage on religious grounds. "I do not recall his supporters labeling him as intolerant, or insensitive or hypocritical or unenlightened. He had a different view than others."

Republicans largely objected to a late amendment to SJR13, which would require not just the repeal of the gay marriage ban, but also inserting into the constitution a requirement

that the state recognize such unions.

“Process is important,” said Senate Minority Leader Michael Roberson, who supported the original version of SJR13, which simply repealed the ban. “The better course of action was and is to pass the original SJR13.”

Kieckhefer, who uttered not a word on the Senate floor, was the only senator to buck his caucus on the vote.

In 2000 and again in 2002, Nevada voters approved a constitutional amendment defining marriage as between a man and woman. Proponents of SJR13 note a shift in public opinion away from that sentiment.

If SJR13 passes, the Legislature would have to approve it again in 2015. The measure would then be placed on the 2016 ballot.

“This is a vote to let the people vote for equality,” said Sen. Pat Spearman, D-North Las Vegas.