

The Salt Lake Tribune

Competing proposals on gay rights to be aired in 2015 session

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THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE

PUBLISHED: DECEMBER 17, 2014 08:36PM

UPDATED: DECEMBER 18, 2014 12:15PM

After being shelved during the last legislative session, the clash over a statewide anti-discrimination law will likely be aired during the upcoming session.

Senate Majority Leader Ralph Okerlund said Republican senators meeting in closed-door caucus Wednesday discussed the anti-discrimination law that will be sponsored by Sen. Steve Urquhart, along with a few competing "religious liberty" proposals that are expected to be introduced.

"I'll be surprised if we don't let those come out this session," Okerlund said. "I'll be surprised if we don't have a good discussion. I think they'll get to committee and we'll see how those play out."

The Senate Republicans discussed the competing proposals and various other topics during the first of two planned all-day caucuses in advance of the session. They will gather again in January.

Last session, legislative leaders refused to let Urquhart's anti-discrimination bill, SB100, have a committee hearing. Legislators feared opposition to the bill could be interpreted as "animus" toward gay and lesbian Utahns, which could have undermined the state's legal defense of its ban on same-sex marriage.

Urquhart staged a very public protest of the decision, with hundreds of Utahns taping notes to the doors of the Senate chamber, asking the body to hear the bill, but to no avail.

Since then, the 10th Circuit Court of Appeals upheld a ruling striking down Utah's marriage law and the U.S. Supreme Court refused to hear the Utah case or other similar cases, legalizing same-sex marriage in Utah and across much of the United States.

With those lawsuits settled, Okerlund said he believes there is no reason not to debate the anti-discrimination bill.

He also said he expects there will be several religious-liberty bills. Ideas for those bills, floated last session but also kept from a public hearing, would allow businesses to refuse service to gay or lesbian patrons, protect an individual's right to discriminate based on religious grounds, and keep the government from forcing churches to perform same-sex marriages.

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