

# Bill would allow Hoosiers to refuse gay weddings

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INDIANAPOLIS (AP) -- Legislation that supporters contend is needed to protect Indiana residents with strong religious beliefs by allowing them to refuse services for same-sex weddings is drawing fire from gay rights groups and others who say it would legalize discrimination.

Sen. Scott Schneider, R-Indianapolis, said his measure is needed to shore up gaps in Indiana's "religious liberty framework" in light of the U.S. Supreme Court's October decision to let stand a federal ruling striking down Indiana's gay marriage ban.

The high court's decision sparked concerns among social conservatives that business owners who oppose gay marriage for religious reasons might be forced to provide services for same-sex weddings.

"The focus has been on same-sex marriage because that's the hot topic right now, but it goes far beyond that," Schneider told The Indianapolis Star (<http://indy.st/1xapYT3>). "It's important to have some religious freedom and protection."

Schneider's bill would allow small businesses, including bakeries, caterers, florists, and wedding chapels, to refuse services to gay couples based on the owner's religious beliefs, said Micah Clark, director of the American Family Association of Indiana, which is lobbying for the measure.

"The freedom of conscience bill is really about limiting government's ability to squelch freedom of religion, conscience or speech," he said.

But Indiana Equality Action President Chris Paulsen said the bill would essentially legalize discrimination.

"We feel any public business should treat everyone equally and should not discriminate against anyone," she said. "We would obviously vigorously oppose anything that allowed discrimination against the LGBT community."

Schneider's bill is likely to receive serious consideration in the new, more conservative General Assembly, which begins its session Tuesday.

Several moderate Republicans lost to more conservative candidates in GOP primaries, and Republicans increased the size of their super-majorities in both chambers in November's general election.

State Rep. Ed DeLaney, D-Indianapolis, said Schneider's bill will create a problem where one doesn't currently exist and only serve to distract lawmaker from focusing on important topics, such as schools and wages.

"We are not being prevented from exercising our faith, nor are we being forced to do something we don't want to do," he said. "It's kind of sad, really."

The bill's precise wording is still being fine-tuned, but one version states that Indiana's actions "shall not burden a person's right to exercise of religion," unless the government can demonstrate that the burden is "essential to further a compelling governmental interest and is the least restrictive means of furthering" that interest.

It also would allow a person exercising his or her religion to use the law as a defense in court, regardless of whether the state is a party to the proceeding.

Indiana lawmakers briefly considered a proposal during their 2014 session that would have allowed religious schools and colleges that receive state contracts to make employment decisions based on religion. That measure was included into an unrelated bill, but later removed amid public outcry.

In 2013, an Indianapolis bakery drew heavy criticism on social media after the owner cited religious grounds for refusing to bake a cake for a gay couple.

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Information from: The Indianapolis Star, <http://www.indystar.com>