

Published in the Mat-Su Frontiersman Newspaper

Vote No on Tuesday

By Rep. Mike Doogan

March 30, 2007

The April 3 advisory vote on same-sex partner health benefits is a waste of money.

Specifically, it is a waste of \$1.2 million, the amount the Division of Elections estimates it will cost to hold the election.

What do we get for \$1.2 million? The opinions of whoever happens to make it to the voting booth. In other words, a poll, but without the careful selection and wording intended to get an unbiased, accurate answer. So we don't get much of anything.

And even if it were an accurate poll, \$1.2 million is a ridiculous amount of money to spend. An Anchorage pollster I asked said he could do a scientific poll for about \$12,000, or 1 percent of what the state will spend.

Seven weeks ago, I tried to stop this waste of money with a bill to require a specific appropriation for the election. If the bill had passed, and we had eliminated the funding, there would have been no election. At that time, the elections division estimated that it had already spent \$200,000. So we would have saved about \$1 million.

The bill went nowhere, and the election machinery ground on.

By March 21, when I introduced another bill to appropriate \$12,000 for a proper opinion poll, the state had spent another \$100,000 or so on the election.

Still, if we abandoned this wasteful election and just paid for the poll, we would save about \$900,000. We could save that money for a rainy day. Or we could use it to hire seven new state troopers or nine new correctional officers or four new pipeline corrosion investigators.

Even here in the Capitol, \$900,000 is a lot of money.

Okay, Mike, you might say. The people who want this election to happen aren't dumb. They know the results won't be scientific. Why are they pushing it anyway?

Rep. John Coghill, R-North Pole, is one of the main supporters of the advisory vote. Here's what he told Channel 2 News earlier this week: "Part of the thing of having an advisory vote is apprising people of the circumstances, and if it creates the kind of pressure I'd like to see in the Legislature to at least get an amendment out for them to consider, then I would see it as successful."

Coghill is the sponsor of HJR 9, the constitutional amendment he thinks could be helped by the advisory vote. In other words, he sees spending \$1.2 million in public funds as a chance to advance his political agenda.

Why is that worth \$1.2 million to Coghill and others? Well, the only argument I've heard is that, somehow, an amendment that would prevent 107 people - the number who signed up with the state - from getting the same-sex partner benefits is a way to protect marriage.

Excuse me? How does keeping a small number of people from receiving health benefits protect marriage? I've been married myself for 36 years now, and I can't see how allowing 107 people to receive health benefits threatens my marriage - or anyone else's.

You know, if the people who want to amend the constitution - again - are really concerned about protecting marriage, they might want to give some thought to this. Married households are now in the minority in the United States. And slightly more than half of all marriages that do occur end in divorce. If there's a threat to marriage, it seems to be from straight people, not gays.

Are we going to amend the state constitution to deal with that threat? Of course not. What would we say? Once you reach 18, you have to get married? And once you get married, you can't get divorced?

We aren't going to do that because we believe that in marriage, as in most things, people deserve freedom of choice. Except if you're gay.

To its credit, the Alaska Supreme Court recognized that. Further, it recognized that the state's Constitution is more than a document that gives authority to the majority. It is a document that protects the rights of the minority.

Among the most important of those protections is the right to equal treatment under the law. And if people who can marry get health benefits for their spouses, people who are not allowed to marry should be able to get health benefits for their partners, too.

So even though I think the election is a waste of money, if they hold it I will vote. I will vote no. You should, too.

Rep. Mike Doogan is a first-term Democrat from Anchorage.