

The Oregonian

Are we there yet, Oregon?

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Editorial

Today marks a jubilant arrival. It's journey's end for two landmark gay-rights bills the Oregon Legislature approved in this session. If all goes as planned, Gov. Ted Kulongoski will sign both Senate Bill 2 and House Bill 2007 into law this morning. Congratulations will flow, toasts too perhaps, if only of sparkling cider, and maybe a few flowery speeches.

Many at the signing ceremony will marvel at this moment, finding it difficult to believe it's really arrived. Some former legislators, who first started pushing for a ban on discrimination against gays and lesbians in 1973, will feel almost jet-lagged, as if they just flew in from a different time zone. And in a way they have.

Yet the two bills involve fundamental protections, so basic, so obvious, that Oregonians, only a few historical minutes from now, will wonder how they ever could have engendered so much controversy. Senate Bill 2 bans discrimination against gays and lesbians, making it illegal to reject them from housing, refuse them service in public places or fire them because of their sexual orientation.

House Bill 2007 creates a system of **domestic partnerships** that, although not the equivalent of marriage, offers roughly similar legal and economic protections to same-sex couples and their children. These bills, together, extend a welcome to gays and lesbians they've never enjoyed before in Oregon.

Yet, in some ways, you could say this welcome was first promised 150 years ago in Article 1, Section 20 of the Oregon Constitution. It said: "No law shall be passed granting to any citizen or class of citizens privileges, or immunities, which, upon the same terms, shall not equally belong to all citizens."

In a mood of similar jubilation for a job well done, on Sept. 18, 1857, one framer of the Oregon Constitution envisioned a state in which our children "will be as free as the winds and the waves, and as secure as the eaglets in their mountain aerie."

In the short run, though, the document he praised was unequal to his high-flown rhetoric, and even fell short of its own promises. The framers excluded African Americans, did not envision women voting and explicitly denigrated people of many backgrounds.

It was only in the long run that it launched our state on a zigzagging journey, forward, backward and forward again, toward equality. A landmark 1998 court ruling in Oregon, requiring public agencies to give same-sex couples the benefits husbands and wives enjoy, would cite this same section of the Oregon Constitution.

The framers could not have envisioned the destination we've reached today, and perhaps

we can't grasp our final destination either. With these two bills, our state moves closer to equality.

We're not there yet. But we're so much closer today than we were yesterday.