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Scouts may end no-gays policy

Call for local dialogue seen as a positive step

By Elaine Thompson TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF

WORCESTER — A vote expected next week that could allow gay Boy Scouts and troop leaders has some in the local Scouting community feeling upbeat.

Jeff Hotchkiss, executive director and chief executive officer of the Worcester-based Mohegan Council, said he and other council leaders were notified in an email Friday that there would be a conference call Monday at 2 p.m. with the Boy Scouts of America CEO and two top volunteers at the national office. During the call they announced that a vote on whether to change the organization's decades old policy of banning homosexuals will be taken at the national board meeting next week.

CORRECTIONS / AMPLIFICATIONS

This story has been amended. Part of Boy Scout Troop 54's history was incorrectly stated was incorrect in the original version.

Mr. Hotchkiss said the change would allow local religious, civic and other charter organizations that oversee Scout troops and packs to decide how to address the issue of homosexuality. He said he is anxious to find out the vote.

"We're happy they're talking about it," Mr. Hotchkiss said Monday. "Just like nationally, we've got people on different sides of our current membership standards. Going away from the one policy fits all to what fits the local charter organizations ... is a good thing."

"We're all about how do we have a better program. How do we have the best youth program that has the best character training and leadership development," he added.

Mr. Hotchkiss said he and board members have been discussing the divisive policy since the BSA reaffirmed its ban on gays seven months ago. On Monday he was drafting a letter to the charter partners and the 137 Scout units and leaders to inform them of the pending vote.

"They're free to comment or not," he said. "We need to let people know, 'Here's what we know.' As I know I'll let my folks know and our charter partners know. Once we know the vote, we'll

go from there.”

If the vote is to allow local decisions on Scouting and leadership standards, Mr. Hotchkiss said one of the first people he will contact will be the Rev. Aaron R. Payson, pastor of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Worcester. The Holden Street church had one of the oldest troops in Worcester, Troop 54, until the church released its charter for the troop several years ago after the 2000 Supreme Court ruling upheld the BSA’s exclusionary policy. At 97 years old, Troop 54 is now the oldest troop in the Mohegan Council and is chartered to Epworth United Methodist Church.

“Like the national office has said, this is a different nation in 2013 than it was in the late 1990s and in 2000,” Mr. Hotchkiss said. “We will need to go and pay a visit and say ‘I heard you had a great history of Scouting. Let’s talk about if we can renew that.’”

Rev. Payson, reached by phone last night at a conference in Florida, said he is happy about the possible lift on the ban on homosexuals.

“If the BSA were to lift (the ban on homosexuals), that would go a long way to us reconsidering, but that was not the only reason we made the choice,” he said. “The other reason was in relation to spiritual orientation.”

He said the decision to stop chartering the troop that had been sponsored by the church for 85 years came after a year of conversation among the congregation and attempts to speak with the BSA. He said the national organization had a difficult relationship with the Unitarian Universalist Association over issues related not only to Scouts and leaders who were gay, but also those who were atheist.

Not much publicity is given to the fact that the BSA also bans atheists. Rev. Payson said the BSA essentially discontinued offering the troop its religion and life award, after the UUA altered the material for the award affirming its support for gay and atheist Scouts and Scoutmasters.

When the 2000 Supreme Court ruling came down upholding the BSA’s discriminatory policy, the BSA stopped conversing with the UUA, Rev. Payson said.

He said next week’s vote does not include the organization’s policy on atheists.

“I think we as a congregation could be re-approached and I would be glad to even raise the subject with our board of management, if that happened,” said Rev. Payson. “It would go a long way to helping us reconcile ourselves with the Boy Scouts. The issue for us is one of religious freedom and social justice related to gay Scouts and Scoutmasters.”

Across the nation, gay-rights activists were elated at the prospect of change, sensing another milestone to go along with recent advances for same-sex marriage and the end of the ban on gays serving openly in the military.

However, Southern Baptist leaders — who consider homosexuality a sin — were furious about the possible change and said its approval might encourage Southern Baptist churches to support other boys’ organizations instead of the BSA.

Monday’s announcement of the possible change comes after years of protests over the no-gays policy — including petition campaigns that have prompted some corporations to suspend donations to the Boy Scouts.

Under the proposed change, said BSA spokesman Deron Smith, “the Boy Scouts would not,

under any circumstances, dictate a position to units, members, or parents.”

Protests over the no-gays policy gained momentum in 2000, when the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the BSA’s right to exclude gays.

More recently, pressure surfaced on the Scouts’ own national executive board. Two high-powered members — Ernst & Young CEO James Turley and AT&T CEO Randall Stephenson — indicated they would try to work from within to change the membership policy, which stood in contrast to their own companies’ non-discrimination policies.

Material from The Associated Press was used in this report

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