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Madison in midst of same-sex marriage battle

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MADISON (AP) - In this small, shoreline town, men argue over which coffee shops have the best breakfast and gossip with the local barber. Families browse along the main drag, shopping at a tiny bookstore or an antique shop that flaunts discounted sarongs.

Lovers Lane is a real street name in Madison, a town of about 18,000 people who cherish waterfront homes and beaches along the Long Island Sound. It is, by all accounts, quintessential New England serenity.

And it's also the new front line in the nation's divisive same-sex marriage battlefield.

Seven Connecticut gay couples last month walked into Madison Town Hall and requested marriage licenses. Each were denied, triggering a lawsuit filed in New Haven Superior Court by Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders (GLAD), the same organization that successfully challenged Massachusetts' same-sex marriage laws.

The lawsuit will begin a legal journey that is expected to take as long as three years. It brings a debate that's been battle-tested in Vermont, Boston and San Francisco to this quiet community.

"Most of the people in here were not too pleased about it," said Holly Magee, owner of Madison Coffee Shop, where regulars have been brewing ever since the lawsuit was filed.

Far from being a hotbed of activism, Madison is best known for its well-groomed mansions that overlook the Long Island Sound.

While nearby New Haven is much more liberal, Republicans outnumber Democrats in Madison.

"Oh, this is one of the nicest towns in Connecticut," said Tony Cavallaro, owner of Tony's Barber Shop. "Everybody takes care of their properties beautifully. Parents are concerned with the school system. It's well-educated people in a conservative town."

GLAD attorney Mary Bonauto said Madison was chosen because it's a midpoint for couples traveling in such opposite directions as Wilton and West Hartford.

"It was really a matter of logistics," she said. "We knew we would get the

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same result wherever we went and there's nothing special about Madison, except it's a lovely place to get married."

First Selectman Thomas S. Scarpati is a bit bewildered as to why his town was chosen, but said he believes GLAD is more interested in positioning the lawsuit not in Madison specifically, but in New Haven County.

Having the case heard in the public eye is important to the organization, Bonauto said.

"This lawsuit is also a vehicle for other people in Connecticut to understand just exactly how their neighbors are being harmed by being denied marriage."

Madison will play a key role in the lawsuit, whether it wants to or not, said Attorney General Richard Blumenthal.

"The state will probably have the laboring ore, but Madison will be required to respond and to appear in court," he said.

That role will likely fall to Madison Deputy Town Clerk Dorothy C. "Dolly" Bean, a short, shy middle-aged woman who has worked for the clerk's office for 17 years.

Weddings are nothing new in Madison - the town issued 52 marriage licenses so far this year - but Bean and the clerk's office had advance warning that seven same-sex couples were planning to ask for licenses.

GLAD lawyers called ahead to let Madison's town attorney, Judith Ravel, know the couples were coming. The clerk's office was then stocked with copies of the legal opinion Blumenthal gave in May that said Connecticut law does not allow for same-sex marriage.

So although Bean said the couples were all "very pleasant," she was prepared to deny them their marriage licenses.

"We really just did what we had to do," Bean said.

While it was the lawyers who decided on Madison, it was the plaintiffs who wanted to marry in Connecticut. Many of them were prepared to make the trip to Massachusetts to exchange vows, but they were foiled when Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney cited a 1913 law barring out-of-state gay couples from wedding there.

Garrett Stack and John Anderson, a couple of 24 years, had menus picked out and hotels booked when they were forced to cancel their July 31 wedding in Stockbridge, Mass. Still, the Woodbridge couple would prefer to marry in Connecticut, where Stack was born and reared.

"I learned to swim at the Madison town beach so it would mean a lot for me to get married there," said Stack, a retiree who spent 12 years as a school principal. "We love the water."

Bonauto's got the resume to back up her fight for same-sex marriage in Connecticut. She was the lead attorney behind the landmark Massachusetts case that led to the legalization of gay marriage, beginning May 17. She was also involved in legal action in Vermont, where same-sex couples can now seek civil unions.



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She expects the case in Connecticut to take three years, but it won't be without its critics or obstacles. The Family Institute of Connecticut last week filed a motion seeking to intervene in the lawsuit, saying it believes marriage is defined as the union of one man and one woman.

"Same-sex marriage creates a situation in which children are permanently robbed of ever having a chance of a mom and dad. Two moms or two dads, however loving they may be, do not and never can make up for having both a mom and a dad," said Brian Brown, executive director of the Family Institute.

Others, like Susan Lepczyk, a 47-year-old speech pathologist in Madison, struggle with the legality of same-sex marriage, but don't want "anyone to not be happy."

"I hear it all, but my feeling is if it doesn't really hurt anybody else, I don't see why not," Cavallaro said. "If they want to get married, it doesn't affect us, so what's the difference?"

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