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**House OKs civil unions; Dramatic victory for Illinois gays, lesbians**

By Dave McKinney

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SPRINGFIELD-Gays and lesbians scored a dramatic victory Tuesday when the Illinois House voted to legalize civil unions in a move that could eventually grant gay partners some of the same spousal rights as married heterosexual couples.

The historic vote capped a busy legislative day that included House approval of a pension package affecting future city cops and firefighters. That bill could blow a more than $500 million hole in the city budget by 2015 -- legislation condemned by Mayor Daley.

The 61-52 civil union vote now passes on to the Senate an issue pushed by gay-rights advocates and Gov. Quinn but opposed by religious leaders such as Cardinal George. A vote is expected in the Senate on Wednesday with signs pointing toward likely passage.

"We have a chance today to make Illinois a more fair state, a more just state and a state which treats all of its citizens equally under the law," said Rep. Greg Harris (D-Chicago), the bill's lead House sponsor.

Harris was brought to tears at one point during debate.

The legislation, which does not alter state law recognizing marriage as being between a man and woman, would grant gay couples new rights regarding hospital visitation, health-care decision-making and the disposal of a loved one's remains, for example.

If the measure passes the Senate and is signed into law by Quinn, who has pledged to do so, Illinois would become the sixth state offering gay couples the right to enter into civil unions or domestic partnerships.

During debate, the normally bustling House chamber fell silent as speaker after speaker rose in support. Only two House members voiced opposition to Senate Bill 1716, claiming it will open the door to legalized gay marriage in Illinois.

Rep. Ron Stephens (R-Greenville), who voted against the measure, went so far as to argue that Illinois' support of civil unions would contribute to the decline of American civilization.

"If you look at the sociological history of societies that have failed, what are some of the commonalities? One of those is that open homosexuality becomes accepted in the higher society, whether it's in Greek times, the Romans or others, and here we are at that precipice again," Stephens said.

Earlier in the day, the House, by a 95-18 vote, sent to the Senate a package that would delay retirement with full benefits for future police and firefighters and cap the size of their pensions.

The bill established a steep yearly payment schedule for Chicago to restore the city's underfunded police and fire retirement funds to financial health, but Daley warned the extra $548 million the city will have to pump into city police and fire pension funds by 2015 could leave homeowners stuck with higher property taxes.

"You cannot place the financial problems on the back of every homeowner in Chicago. Besides that, every business in Chicago. That will make our city basically a city that will have a financial disaster," Daley said.

In other action, the House gave the go-ahead to a $3 billion coal-burning power plant on the South Side that will produce natural gas and narrowly defeated legislation that would have legalized marijuana for medicinal use.

Rep. Lou Lang (D-Skokie) kept the medicinal marijuana legislation alive through a parliamentary maneuver but Tuesday's vote dealt a potentially fatal blow to efforts to pass the bill before a new General Assembly is seated in January.

Lang's legislation permitted those with more than a dozen illnesses or conditions -- ranging from cancer to multiple sclerosis to Crohn's Disease -- to obtain marijuana for relief of their symptoms so long as they obtain a prescription from their doctor.

But opponents argued the bill was a pathway to legalization of marijuana in Illinois. Others contended if the drug was so effective medically, it would have been long since legalized by Congress.

"This concept goes well beyond medical use, medical treatment," said Rep. David Reis (R-Willow Hill). "This is about the legalization of marijuana."

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