



Houston Mayor Annise Parker *Richard Carson / Reuters*

The Houston City Council, led by out Mayor Annise Parker, passed an ordinance Wednesday that prohibits discrimination in employment, housing, and public accommodations, including on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity.

Houston City Council members approved the measure, or the Houston Equal Rights Ordinance, after hearing hours of passionate testimony in a 11-6 vote. More than 220 people testified before the council, Parker said, with a majority in favor of the ordinance.

"I do love this city," Parker said upon passage of the ordinance. "While much of the debate has centered around the gay and lesbian protections in the ordinance, it is a comprehensive ordinance. ... It is a good step forward for the city of Houston."

The ordinance broadly bans discrimination — on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity — as well as on the basis of sex, race, ethnicity, national origin, age, familial status, marital status, military status, religion, disability, genetic information, or pregnancy.

Parker and proponents of the measure say it will allow the city to address and investigate discrimination claims in the areas of housing, public accommodations, and employment — with exemptions for religious employers and employers with fewer than 50 employees. Churches and religious institutions are exempt, but businesses are not, Parker emphasized during the testimony.

City Council Member Mike Laster said during his remarks prior to the vote that the bill was "designed to protect as many people as possible," and Council Member Ed Gonzalez said, "There's no mystery to this. This is a comprehensive ordinance and it covers everybody, just about. It's not just about one group."

In other words, "The ordinance cannot force you to do anything, but it does say you can't decide to do for one group of people what you won't do for another group of

people,” said Terri Burke, executive director at the American Civil Liberties Union of Texas. Along with the ACLU and LGBT rights organization like Equality Texas, several other major groups, from the NAACP to business interests like the Greater Houston Partnership, expressed support for the ordinance.

“Today’s passage by the Houston City Council of an Equal Rights Ordinance is a victory for all Houstonians,” said Chuck Smith, executive director at Equality Texas, in a statement to BuzzFeed. “In a city that revels in its diversity, it is only appropriate that Houston codify into law its prohibition of discrimination in employment, housing, and public accommodations. We are grateful to Mayor Parker and the members of the Houston City Council for their leadership on this ordinance. Houston is a great city, and today it just got better.”

Opponents of the ordinance [have threatened](#) to attempt to repeal the ordinance by way of a voter referendum, and even attempt to remove Parker and council members who support the ordinance from office.

Houston was the only major city in the U.S. that did not offer such protections prior to the passage of the ordinance, according to Parker’s office.

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