The Houston
DIGEST
Week of
July 16, 1984
the city's weekly newspaper

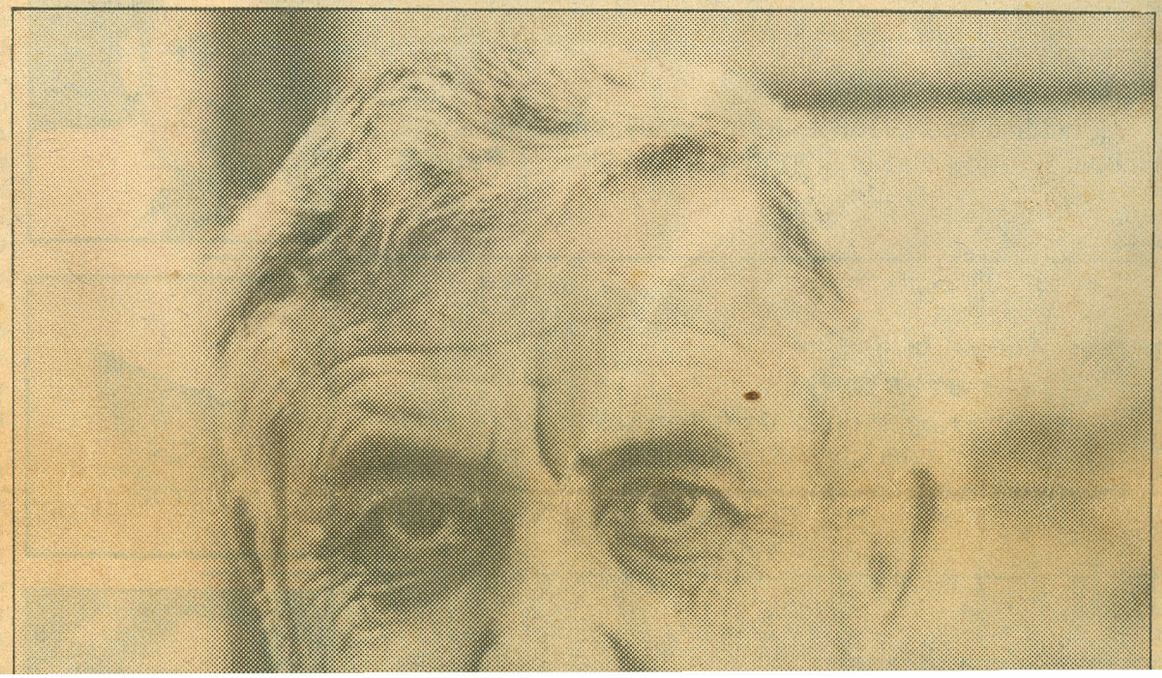
Tolerate, not legislate, says Goodner on gay rights

Chief Brown gives officers with take-home vehicles a little extra time before rescinding privileges.

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Harris County



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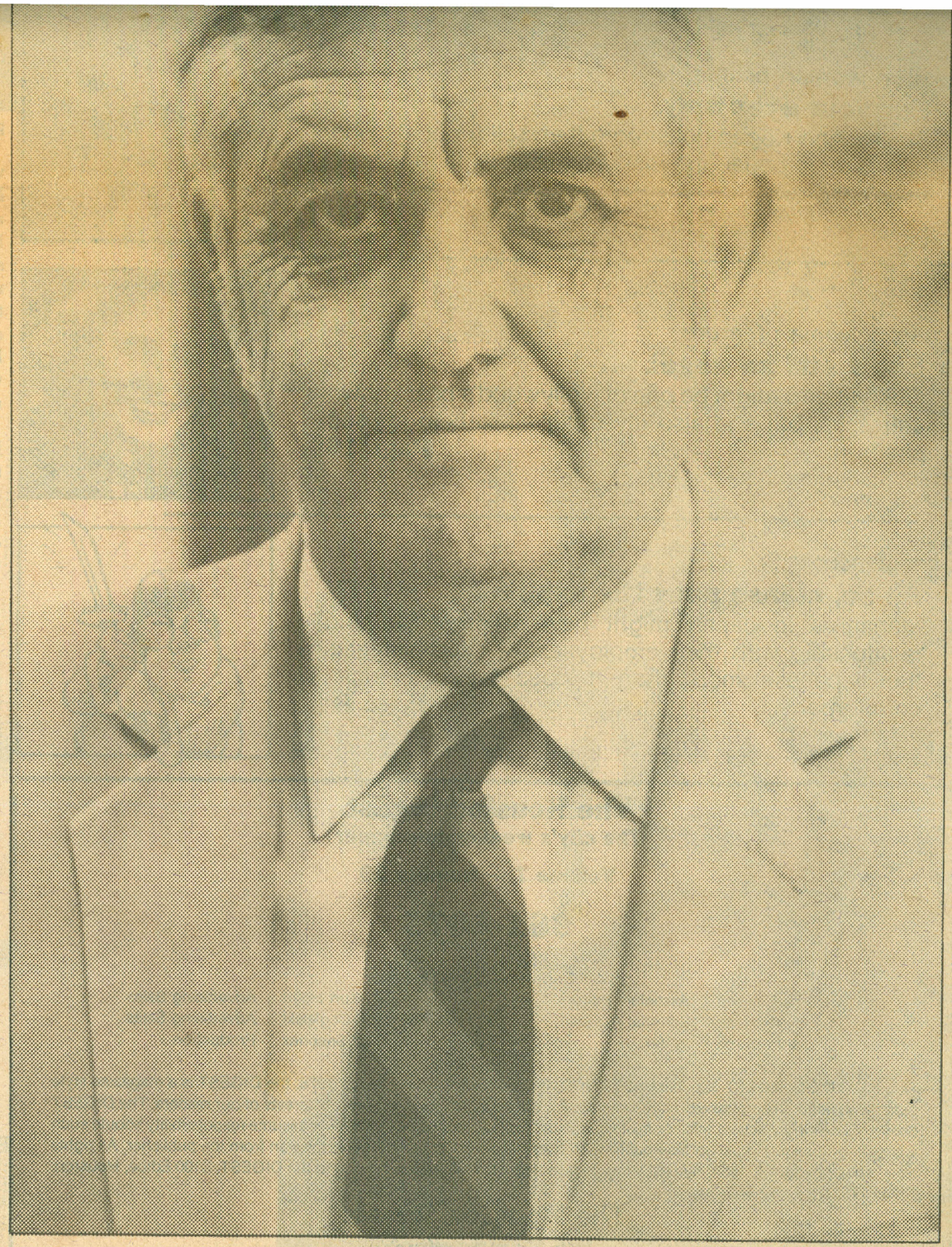
Harris County conventioneers playing politics out in San Francisco in spite of expenses.

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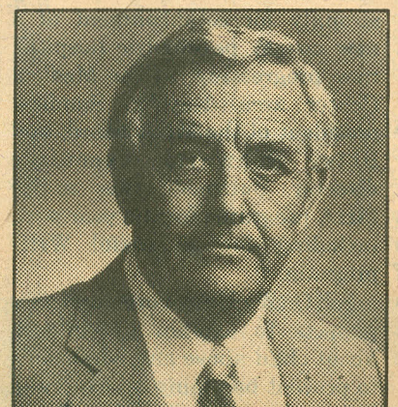
Take a trip to the stars with Houston Astronomical Society President Art Ciampi.

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Tolerate, not legislate, says Goodner on gay rights

It's an even more volatile issue than the question of what to do with illegal aliens. It brings out the best and worst in people, has its roots in the civil rights movement, the bible, the decline of American morality and the self-awareness and sexuality aspects of the "Me Generation." It has made for the strangest coalition of political bedfellows in recent Houston history, uniting Democrat and Republican, Catholic and Protestant, black, white and hispanic while at the same time alienating individuals within these various groups. "It" is the gay rights issue and the pending referendum. But whether or not there will be a referendum and when it would be remains to be seen. As of Friday last week, the Committee for Public Awareness said it had only 10,000 of the nearly 30,000 signatures it needs to force a general vote on the subject and County Clerk Anita Rodeheaver said the July 19 deadline for the petition drive is too late to get it on the ballot for the Aug. 11 vote. The next date for an election allowed by state law is in January. If the referendum



John Goodner

the way for interpretations which would seriously challenge existing laws. An example cited is the recent case of the Austin Independent School District clerk who was fired from his job for publishing material which justified and urged people to practice pedophilia. Had that man worked for the city of Houston, he could not be fired for his sexual preference. In this becoming another Sodom or Gomorrah.

The real issue is not just civil rights for homosexuals, as the GPC publically claims, nor is it exclusively an attempt to upgrade the moral fiber of Houston, as the committee often states. What is really at stake in this referendum drive is political power and a definition of the influence of the GPC. What is on the line is the ability of one special interest group to sway a segment of the population over to its side to defeat another segment of the population. It's more than a simple gay versus straight issue; it's a test of whether or not the well-organized political apparatus of the GPC can withstand a fourth quarter rally by a coalition of various Houston political, economic and racial groups.

The Montrose machine

What can a highly motivated organization of 600 members do without much funding in a part of town that is well-known for its sex shops, massage parlors and nude dancers? The answer is plenty, if

Parker said the GPC computes its citywide strength on the basis of "the standard 10 percent rule." She explained the rule means that a full 10 percent of Houston's 2.5 million people are gay, giving the homosexuals at least 250,000 people to call their own. She and other members of the GPC board of directors estimated that of this figure, possibly as many as half, if not more, are of voting age. According to the GPC's figures, this would rank the gay community behind blacks and hispanics in terms of size and votes. But unlike any of Houston's minority groups, the gays tend to vote en masse, she said. That is why they are such a potent political force.

However, Mather disagrees with this assessment. "I find it hard to believe that out of every group, boy, girl, man, woman and senior citizen, that one out of 10 people are homosexual," he said. He said he believes the total is closer to 4 percent, which would give the gay community a power base of approximately 100,000 people in all of Houston. A University of Houston psycologist

issues such as health, the police and appropriations for certain services designed to benefit the gay community. For example: "Both New York and San Francisco have a funded position in their city health departments called the 'Coordinator of Gay and Lesbian Health Services.' What should be available and what do you intend to do to provide it?" This was asked of Houston candidates in the last municipal election.

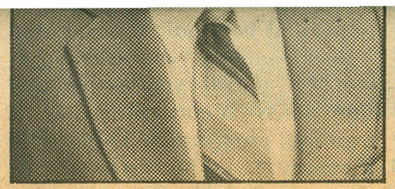
Goodner sent his form back, saying it was too complex and he did not have the time to answer it, the GPC said. But one candidate who did answer the written questionnaire and also underwent the oral examination was Anthony Hall, who Parker said actively sought the endorsement of the GPC. He did not get it, she added, saying that the GPC instead chose to back Nikki Van Hightower for councilmember at-large. It is interesting to note that Hall, who did not have the endorsement, defeated Van Hightower, who did, in a city-wide ballot, raising questions about just how powerful the gay vote is.

or not there will be a referendum and when it would be remains to be seen. As of Friday last week, the Committee for Public Awareness said it had only 10,000 of the nearly 30,000 signatures it needs to force a general vote on the subject and County Clerk Anita Rodeheaver said the July 19 deadline for the petition drive is too late to get it on the ballot for the Aug. 11 vote. The next date for an election allowed by state law is in January. If the referendum were to be held as a separate election, it could cost taxpayers as much as $350,000, the estimated cost for holding a ballot of this nature.

The furor started when City Council recently approved amendments to two separate ordinances which prevent discrimination against city employees because of their sexual preference. This is a move which has been promoted, in theory at least, by the Houston Gay Political Caucus (GPC) for several years, and while the organization does not take credit for the introduction of the amendments —Councilman At-Large Anthony Hall did that — the GPC lables the 8-7 Council vote as a timely and progressive step toward ensuring civil rights for a certain segment of Houston's population.

Councilman John Goodner does not see the gay rights amendments as a progressive step; just the opposite is what Goodner said when asked about it. He said that tolerance and acceptance of the gay community is one thing, "but I don't think the city should try and make one group special by recognition. To my mind," he said, "that's counterproductive."

Another objection supporters of the referendum have about the gay rights amendments is the term "sexual orientation." Many feel that this is too vague a definition and could possibly open



John Goodner

publishing material which justified and urged people to practice pedophilia. Had that man worked for the city of Houston, he could not be fired for his sexual preference. In this specific case, the man was fired for using the AISD computer in an illegal manner, and opponents of the referendum pointed out that even sexual orientation would not protect a city employee from publishing such material on city time and with city equipment.

Goodner formed the Committee for Public Awareness the Friday before the Council vote in order to get public response about the issue. The public responded in a manner which resulted in a flood of phone calls to City Hall and more than 300 people showed up at the Council chambers on the day of the vote to protest the gay rights amendments. The vote passed on the tie-breaking action of Mayor Kathy Whitmire and today the Committee for Public Awareness is involved in a petition drive, trying to force a public referendum on the gay rights issue.

Goodner's ally on the committee is the chairman of the Harris County Republican Party, Russ Mather. Mather is quick to point out that the GOP is not directly involved in the petition drive, but he said he feels that it is his civic duty to do his best to bring about the referendum because he believes City Council "railroaded the gay rights issue down our throats." Other members of the committee believe that City Council's actions have put Houston firmly on the road to well-organized political apparatus of the GPC can withstand a fourth quarter rally by a coalition of various Houston political, economic and racial groups.

The Montrose machine

What can a highly motivated organization of 600 members do without much funding in a part of town that is well-known for its sex shops, massage parlors and nude dancers? The answer is plenty, if that organization is the GPC. Board Chair Annise Parker told *The Digest* that the GPC has conducted massive voter registration drives in the Montrose area, sending volunteers out on door-to-door sweeps in search of a power base. Registration is pushed at nearly every GPC function, she said, and new voters have been signed at the gay pride parades and other gay community events. The result, she said, is that the Montrose vote can be counted on when GPC feels it needs it. "We can count on Montrose," she said, "and we are also extremely influential in the Galleria area as well."

But the real scope of the GPC's power is in question by many city officials. The GPC claims to have a growing power base in southwest Houston, Goodner's home turf, but the councilman is unmoved by these allegations. Councilmember Christin Hartung, who voted with Goodner against the gay rights amendments and whose district includes a bit of Montrose and nearly all of the Galleria area, is also not intimidated by the GPC. However, the GPC has some sort of influence on the city's four at-large councilmembers, who all went along with the gay rights vote. But just what that influence is or amounts to is not entirely clear.

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However, Mather disagrees with this assessment. "I find it hard to believe that out of every group, boy, girl, man, woman and senior citizen, that one out of 10 people are homosexual," he said. He said he believes the total is closer to 4 percent, which would give the gay community a power base of approximately 100,000 people in all of Houston. A University of Houston psycologist estimated that percentages of urban gays vary between 4 and 10 percent of a city's total

GAY POLITICAL CAUCUS

population, depending on a number of factors such as region, climate and economics.

The GPC has a mailing list of approximately 11,000 names (not all of them gay) and businesses and Parker said that only 20 percent of this is in the Montrose area. But also on the GPC's mailing list, at least at election time, are the candidates for various city, county, state and school board elections. The GPC routinely submits questionnaires to the candidates to explore their awareness of the issues and problems facing the gay community. It is from these screenings that the GPC makes determinations about whom or whom not to endorse. The questions on these forms are complex and varied, dealing with

questionnaire and also underwent the oral examination was Anthony Hall, who Parker said actively sought the endorsement of the GPC. He did not get it, she added, saying that the GPC instead chose to back Nikki Van Hightower for councilmember at-large. It is interesting to note that Hall, who did not have the endorsement, defeated Van Hightower, who did, in a city-wide ballot, raising questions about just how powerful the gay vote is.

The GPC is proud of its organization and claims that the Houston machine is one of the best-run in the nation. San Francisco's gay community cannot be delivered to a candidate the way Houston's can, Parker said, because it is too large and splintered into smaller groups, each with its own separate goals. In Houston, she said, even party lines are not rigid barriers to the GPC, which has both Republicans and Democrats on its board and in its membership. And all of this influence comes from an organization which is funded solely by the endowments of about 60 members who are in the financial shape to donate money, she said, adding that the GPC has never and will never make monetary contributions to any political candidates.

What the GPC does donate is volunteers to those candidates it choses to endorse. Political campaigns run on money and volunteers. People are needed for the tedious but necessary tasks of envelope stuffing, manning the phone banks and doing routine legwork such as delivering leaflets. The GPC has plenty of people to call upon for these tasks, board member Dale Beverly said, since many gays are transient in nature and often have the time available to be an effective volunteer.

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Gay rights
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The power of perception

And here is where the real power of the GPC truly exists. Goodner and Mather both agreed that the GPC is well-organized. "The power of the GPC is organization," Goodner said.

But the politicos associated with the Committee for Public Awareness also said the GPC has a lot of area politicians fooled. The GPC's ability to come up with volunteers, plus the fact that there are homosexuals on the staffs of several high-ranking city officials, tends to give many politicians the impression that the gay community is a vital and perhaps dominant force in Houston politics. Goodner agreed with the assessment that all too often, legislators at both the state and national level, as well as councilmembers here in Houston, tend to see the world through the eyes of the special interests which are able to work their way into a politician's confidence.

The GPC does not deny its activity at City Hall. The organization regularly sends delegations to meet with individual councilmembers on isues concerning the gay community and when necessary, the GPC shows up at Council meetings. The GPC sent letters to councilmembers staffs after the gay rights vote, thanking them for all their hard work during the deluge of phone calls which all but stymied city operations for two days. Beverly said he was at City Hall last December to speak for the gay rights amendments especially the black councilmembers who voted for gay rights. He said that Houston black religious leaders are extremely opposed to the amendments and he has even had to substitute as a speaker to a meeting of black ministers on the petition drive after Councilman Rodney Ellis elected not to do so. Ellis voted for the gay rights amendments.

The pulpit is the Committee for Public Awareness's first line of offense in the petition drive. More than 600 area ministers have picked up copies of the petition for circulation within their congregations and with less than one week to go before the mandated one-month deadline, the committee believes it will have no difficulties in obtaining the required 30,000 signatures. In fact, Mather said the committee had distributed enough petition forms to gather more than 1 million signatures.

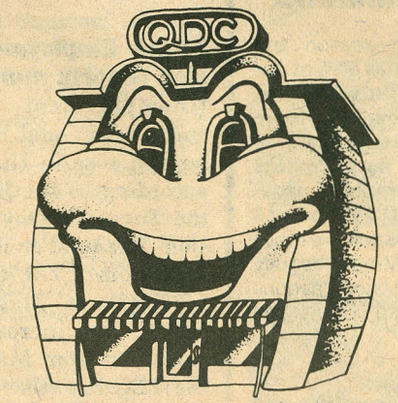


District to include the hiring and employment protection of gay teachers, as well as modification of teaching policies regarding alternative lifestyles. She said the homosexual lifestyle is grossly misrepresented in area schools and the rights of gay parents are not fully protected by current HISD policy.

"We don't want quotas" regarding city or HISD hiring policies, Parker said. "We just don't want to be discriminated against." And in this sense, both Goodner and Mather relatively agree with the GPC. Goodner does not favor discrimination of homosexuals and Mather said: "As a Christian, I do not condone homosexuality. The bible condems the act, not the person, and I agree with that. I am concerned, as a father, about my children being exposed to homosexuals, who do try to recruit, no matter what they say."

Parker denied that homosexuals try to recruit children, saying that most acts of sexual abuse committed against children come from heterosexuals who were themselves abused as children. And whereas this is a fear of most of the more emotional of the supporters of the Committee for Public Awareness, the primary objection deals with the question of what influence homosexuals will have with children if gays are placed in positions where they can serve as role models. It's the subjective impressions left on a young, formative mind that worry many committee members. A gay

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delegations to meet with individual councilmembers on isues concerning the gay community and when necessary, the GPC shows up at Council meetings. The GPC sent letters to councilmembers staffs after the gay rights vote, thanking them for all their hard work during the deluge of phone calls which all but stymied city operations for two days. Beverly said he was at City Hall last December to speak for the gay rights amendments when they were first proposed and the GPC had about 25 supporters there for the final vote in June. All of this is legal, above board, and quite acceptable in American politics.

But the Committee for Public Awareness is not happy about it. Goodner and Mather both are quite distressed about the manner in which the gay rights amendments vote was conducted at City Hall. Goodner said it came up briefly in December and then forgotten until May. He said there was never enough of an attempt to solicit public response on the issue and when that response did finally come, it was ignored by the slimmest of majorities in the City Council.

Mather echoed Goodner's assessment of City Council's actions. "There was no discussion on it at all until May, when John Goodner screamed, and then when 81 people signed up to speak about it, Council decided not to allow those people to speak, ignored thousands of incoming phone calls and then did what they wanted to do. To me it says they (the GPC) had the votes and to hell with everybody else in the city of Houston," he said.

Goodner said that some of the councilmembers who originally supported the amendments are now "running scared" from their own constituents about it,



Russ Mather

After the storm

If the referendum materializes, the Committee for Public Awareness and the GPC will both begin extensive campaigns aimed at getting out the vote. This will certainly include newspaper and radio advertisements, as well as phone calls and good old fashioned pressing the flesh by politicos on both sides of the gay rights fence.

The effects of a defeat of the committee cannot be estimated, Mather said, primarily because the committee is judging the referendum in terms of morals in spite of its political nature. Goodner explained that win or lose, he does not see the Committee for Public Awareness getting involved in any other issues.

The GPC is optimistic about the referendum either way. Parker said a defeat would "show us where we stand and identify where we are the strongest." A victory, she said, would be a signal that it is time to press ahead for other goals. These long-range goals include housing protection under fair housing legislation and changes within the Houston Independent School

from heterosexuals who were themselves abused as children. And whereas this is a fear of most of the more emotional of the supporters of the Committee for Public Awareness, the primary objection deals with the question of what influence homosexuals will have with children if gays are placed in positions where they can serve as role models. It's the subjective impressions left on a young, formative mind that worry many committee members. A gay swim instructor for the Parks and Recreation Department might be effective at his job and might never try to influence his pupils toward imitating his lifestyle. But the impact on the child who sees a respected and trusted authority figure embrace or kiss his male lover might set up a serious conflict between what his parents are trying to teach him and what he sees as accepted conduct, committee members say.

Mather also worries that Houston is sending a message to the world that it might not necessarily want to send. Surprisingly enough, the GPC said the exact same thing about the referendum, but for a different reason, citing that for once both left and right, church and the Ku Klux Klan are uniting to deny civil rights to a group of people.

The referendum will not change the morality of the gay community, nor will it spread homosexuality into the suburbs. As the GPC argues with the Committee for Public Awareness, what Houston voters will chose, if the referendum is approved, is to send to City Hall the word on who has the most political clout. □

Martin Burch

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