

'End the hate'

By Sam Farr, Member of Congress

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Prejudice against gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgendered is one of the last bastions for intolerance in America, and it's long overdue that we end such bigotry.

Last week, the House of Representatives took a step in that direction, passing the Employment Non-Discrimination Act. It may sound like a typically dull piece of Washington legislation, but it's funny how some of the most important pieces of law can hide behind the most innocuous of names.

This bill, known by the acronym ENDA, is so illustrative of the Democratic agenda of tolerance and inclusion. The law has a very simple goal: prohibiting discrimination in the workplace based on sexual orientation.

Being gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender is not a choice, it's an identity. It's unfortunate that so many in the Republican Party are largely ignorant (and dare I say frightened) of the LGBT community. That's the only explanation I can conceive of for their shrill opposition to equal protection. That and a healthy dose of intolerance, of course.

The ENDA bill reads much like portions of the Civil Rights Act that was passed in 1964. That historic bill served to outlaw discrimination by employers on the basis of race, sex, religion or national origin.

If an employer fires a worker because he is black or she is pregnant, the community would rise up in protest. But bias based on sexual orientation is tolerated in far too many communities.

The Human Rights Campaign, the nation's largest organization promoting civil rights for the

gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community, is a strong supporter of last week's bill. The group points out that in 31 states, it is legal to fire an employee based on sexual orientation, and in 39 states it is legal to fire someone for being transgender.

This type of widespread intolerance is unacceptable, a sickness that we must all work to cure. Rep. Barney Frank, an openly gay Congressman from Massachusetts, has passionately led the charge on this bill. He has done a fabulous job gathering widespread support for this and other important bills, and I honor his great work.

But this legislation has not enjoyed universal support, even within the LGBT community. Many organizations disagree with Rep. Frank's decision to remove protections for transgender people. I agree with the idea that we should not single out a few groups for protection and leave others behind. Rep. Frank agrees, as well.

But the bottom line is that we must not allow Republican activists to sabotage the bill over this provision. ENDA is not perfect, but we have to start somewhere. Yes, an incremental approach must be maddening for those who have waited so long for their civil rights to be recognized.

But as painful as it may be to hear, politics is the art of the possible. The simple truth is that a transgender amendment would doom the bill, a setback for the entire LGBT community.

"Our fight for equality will not be won overnight," noted Joe Solmonese, president of the Human Rights Campaign. "It will be won one step at a time, and we will not give up until we reach the finish line."

And that's what I promise all of you. Democrats will not stop with this victory. We will work to have our colleagues in the Senate introduce and pass this bill. We will work to have the president sign it. And we will work to extend protections to the transgender community.

But we can't do this alone. We need active, vocal support from people around the country. Santa Cruz is lucky. We have many passionate individuals working to achieve civil rights for everyone.

Stuart Rosenstein is one of those individuals. He serves as chair of the Santa Cruz Queer Youth Task Force and is a powerful voice for equal rights. If we had more people willing to work as hard as Stuart, we would be that much closer to our goal.

I encourage everyone who reads this column to call Senators Boxer and Feinstein and express your support for ENDA. Only as a united voice will we achieve the equality that all of us deserve, and I'm proud to help lead the fight in Washington.