

Senate toughens abortion law

By Allison Stevens
Special to Sentinel-Voice
WASHINGTON (Women's e-News) - Legislation that would place another restriction on access to abortion cleared a major hurdle Tuesday, prompting reproductive rights advocates to gear up for another protracted legal battle over abortion rights.

By a margin of 65 to 34, the Senate passed a bill that would make it a federal crime to transport a pregnant woman under 18 across state lines to circumvent state parental notification laws. The legislation makes an exception for those whose lives are endangered by pregnancy but not for those whose health is in danger.

Thirty-four states have some form of parental consent or notification law, though some of those laws are not enforced because of court battles or actions by state attorneys general, according to the Guttmacher Institute, a pro-choice think tank in New York. If the Senate measure becomes law, notification would essentially be required in all states.

"Reasonable people can at least come together on some restrictions on abortion," said Nevada Sen. John Ensign, a

Republican, who sponsored the legislation. "This is one of those reasonable restrictions."

Democrats disagreed. "This bill is just another ploy for the majority to get their base on their side in an election year," Sen. Patty Murray of Washington said, citing recent votes on proposals that would amend the Constitution to ban same-sex marriage and flag-burning. "Women's lives are being used as pawns in a political debate."

The bill prohibits parents and other adults from taking a pregnant minor to another state to have an abortion without complying with parental involvement laws in the young woman's home state.

If the bill is signed into law, the New York-based American Civil Liberties Union has committed to challenging it on behalf of the National Abortion Federation, a professional association of abortion providers based in Washington, D.C.

The Planned Parenthood Federation of America and the Center for Reproductive Rights — two abortion rights groups in New York — have also committed to challenging the bill on behalf of vari-

ous clients, said Julie Sternberg, a senior staff attorney at the ACLU's Reproductive Freedom Project.

The first step in a legal challenge would be to seek an immediate injunction to prevent the law from taking effect while the case is litigated, Sternberg said.

But the bill first has to win the president's signature. That can happen only after a conference committee session in which House and Senate negotiators hammer out the differences between the Senate bill and a stricter House version that passed last year.

The House bill encompasses the Senate language but also would require doctors to notify out-of-state parents at least 24 hours before performing an abortion or give notice in writing at least 72 hours in advance of the procedure. Those who do not do so could be sued for damages.

Religious opponents say the legislation is necessary to ensure that parents are involved in their children's decisions to have an abortion. They say the bill will prevent family planning clinics, boyfriends and other individuals from coercing vulnerable teens into having abortions

without their parents' knowledge.

"Adult men have a very significant interest in getting a girl they've impregnated out of a state with parental consent laws into another state (without such laws) to get her an abortion," said Jan LaRue, chief counsel for Concerned Women for America, an advocacy organization in Washington, D.C.

"They don't want to be subject to statutory rape laws, and they don't want to be liable for child support for 18 years. So they want to destroy the evidence."

If signed into law, the legislation might force young women to involve an abusive parent in their decision-making, deter those who may have to travel longer distances or wait longer periods for abortions, compel minors to carry an unwanted pregnancy to term, drive themselves to a clinic or perhaps perform an abortion on themselves.

"I don't see how my colleagues can say this bill is about the safety of young women when it endangers them more," Murray said during the Senate debate Tuesday afternoon.

President Bush is expected to sign the bill. (See Abortions, Page 4)

Gov. sullen over 'tar baby' remark

BOSTON (AP) - Gov. Mitt Romney has apologized for referring to the troubled Big Dig construction project as a "tar baby" during a fundraiser with Iowa Republicans, saying he didn't know anyone would be offended by the term some consider a racial epithet.

In a speech Saturday, Romney, a Republican considering a run for president in 2008, acknowledged he took a big political risk in taking control of the project after a fatal tunnel ceiling collapse, but said inaction would have been even worse.

"The best thing politically would be to stay as far away from that tar baby as I can," he told a crowd of about 100 supporters in Ames, Iowa.

Black leaders were outraged at his use of the term, which dates to the 19th century Uncle Remus stories, referring to a doll made of tar that traps Br'er Rabbit. It has come to be known as a way of describing a sticky mess, and has also been used as a derogatory term for a Black person.

"Tar baby is a totally inappropriate phrase in the 21st century," said Larry Jones, a Black Republican and civil rights activist. "He thinks he's presidential timber," Jones said. "But all he's shown us is arrogance."

Romney's spokesman, Eric Fehrnstrom, said the governor was describing "a sticky situation."

"He was unaware that some people find the term objectionable and he's sorry if anyone's offended," Fehrnstrom said.

Fehrnstrom produced copies of editorials and columns from Boston newspapers using "tar baby" in a context similar to Romney's. One example from 2004, a *Herald* editorial, used the term about the Big Dig itself.

"It just goes to show you that not everyone is aware the term is considered offensive to some people," he said.

White House spokesman Tony Snow sparked similar criticism in May when he used the term in response to a question about government surveillance.

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