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The News-Times

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Proposed bill to change Roman Catholic Church finances offends parishioners

By Nanci G. Hutson
STAFF WRITER

Gerald Ronan of Bridgewater will not be able to go to the state legislature Wednesday.

But he is lending his voice to the chorus of Catholics outraged about a proposed bill related to church finances that church leaders say is retribution for church stands on gay marriage and abortion.

Diocesan leaders contend the proposed bill, which would restructure the church's financial hierarchy, is a First Amendment violation.

After first learning about the proposal Friday, and hearing more at Mass on Sunday, Ronan, a parishioner of St. Francis Xavier Church in New Milford, said his reaction was the same as church leaders'.

"This is discriminating against Catholics and is unconstitutional," said Ronan, who has sent e-mail messages to fellow parishioners and area legislators to defeat the measure.

On Wednesday, churches throughout the diocese will send buses and caravans to Hartford so parishioners, priests and other diocesan leaders can object at the Judiciary Committee's noon public hearing on the bill submitted by state Sen. Andrew J. McDonald, D-Stamford, and Rep. Michael Lawlor, D-East Haven.

Bridgeport Diocese spokesman Joseph McAleer said more than 2,000 Catholics from Fairfield County are expected to attend.

Calls to several area Roman Catholic clergy Monday were not returned.

A secretary for Monsignor Robert Weiss at St. Rose of Lima Church in Newtown said the priest was not available and referred calls to the diocese.

The bill as proposed would put financial decision-making in the hands of parish members, with the diocese bishop and parish priests serving as nonvoting members.

Bridgeport Bishop William Lori called the bill a "thinly veiled attempt to silence the Catholic Church on the important issues of the day, such as same-sex marriage."

Legislator McDonald's assertion that without this change church members at the parish level have no financial control is "completely untrue," McAleer said.



Gene Bates, of Danbury, a practicing Catholic, hopes to go to Hartford Wednesday to protest a proposed bill that would affect the way the church handles money.

He said the diocese promotes full disclosure and accountability about its finances, with mechanisms for those who have questions about how parish finances are managed.

"If you suspect something in the parish, there is a hotline to call," McAleer said.

In addition, he said, every parish has a financial council and there is an up-to-date manual on financial policies and procedures. Financial reports from the diocese are available to all parishioners.

The Bridgeport Diocese's financial monitoring process has been so successful it has been copied by dioceses across the country, McAleer said.

"Bishop Lori and his finance team have really been leading lights in the issue of financial controls, accountability and trans-

General Assembly continues volatile debate on religious finances legislation

By Ken Dixon
STAFF WRITER

HARTFORD — Lingering bad feelings about multi-million-dollar losses at Roman Catholic parishes in southwestern Connecticut have set off a volatile debate in the General Assembly over the separation of church and state and the rights of parishioners to oversee church affairs.

Catholics led by Bridgeport Bishop William E. Lori said Monday that the legislature is attempting to meddle in its operations, in apparent violation of the Constitution.

State Sen. Andrew J. McDonald, D-Stamford, co-chairman of the Judiciary Committee, said Monday he does not support a proposed change to allow more parishioner participation on the boards of individual churches.

McDonald said he scheduled the bill for a public hearing Wednesday because southwestern Connecticut Catholics, including members of the Darien and Greenwich churches that sustained scandalous financial fraud and mismanagement, asked him.



LORI

But McDonald wonders why there are incorporation statutes in the first place that allowed Catholics, Lutherans and other so-called hierarchical churches to organize with a minority of appointed lay members.

The New York-based Catholic League For Religious and Civil Rights on Monday called for the "expulsion" of McDonald and another committee co-chairman, because they are "ethically unfit" to remain in office.

"They have evinced a bias so strong and so malicious that it compromises their ability to serve the public good," Catholic League president Bill Donohue said in a statement.

Meanwhile, Attorney General Richard Blumenthal on Monday said the fulminating arguments show that the state's laws on church organization may not hold up under close constitutional scrutiny.

"I think what this amendment has revealed is a much broader and bigger issue relating to the existing statutory framework, which clearly is fraught with grave constitutional issues," Blumenthal said in an interview.

"There's a very strong argument that this entire section relating to governance and structure of religious institutions violates the first amendment of the U.S. Constitution."

During a conference call with the Hearst Connecticut Newspapers on Monday, Lori and other church officials said that extraordinary financial controls have been established in recent years

after incidents at St. John Church in Darien and St. Michael the Archangel Church in Greenwich.

"I can tell you this legislation would reorganize us in ways contrary to the teachings and the law of the church," Lori said. "It really is an excuse to get into the church and silence the church."

Lori said it could be the result of continuing animosity from McDonald and Rep. Michael P. Lawlor, D-East Haven, the other co-chairman, over the issue of same-sex marriage.

McDonald, who is gay, denied it, noting the state's Supreme Court has ruled on the issue and made it legal. "That fight's over," McDonald said in an interview.

In fact, McDonald said, he discussed the new church incorporation legislation last year with members of the Connecticut Catholic Conference after similar legislation was submitted by a Re-

Church vs. state

Danbury jobless

rate rises

Unemployment figures still rank as lowest in the state

By Robert Miller
STAFF WRITER

DANBURY — The Danbury area's unemployment rate jumped to 6.6 percent in January, with 1,300 more jobless residents than the previous month.

The only solace in those numbers is that the seven-municipality Danbury region still has the lowest unemployment rate in the state.

The seven are Bethel, Bridgewater, Brookfield, New Fairfield, Danbury, New Milford and Sherman.

"It's nice to see Danbury has the lowest rate in the state," Stephen Bull, president of the Greater Danbury Chamber of Commerce, said Monday. "But it's not good for people who have lost their jobs."

According to a report released Monday by the state Department of Labor, the 6.6 percent for the Danbury area meant about 6,000 people were out of work.

In December, the unemployment rate was 5.1 percent, and the number of workers without jobs was 4,700.

A year ago, in January 2008, the unemployment rate in the region stood at 4.4 percent, and the number of unemployed at 4,000.

But, elsewhere in the state, the situation is even worse, ranging from 7.3 percent in the Bridgeport-Stamford area — which includes Newtown, Southbury, Redding and Ridgefield — to 10.4 percent in the Waterbury area.

Bull said Danbury has its work force diversity to thank for that. "We have an extremely progressive business community here."

The city is not dominated by any single business, he said, so unlike towns that depend on manufacturing, it hasn't been bled too badly. The manufacturing sector in the state saw the largest number of job losses — 2,200 — from December to January.

Please see UNEMPLOYMENT on A4

Our stats

Unemployment rates for the seven-municipality Danbury region:
January 2009 — 6.6 percent
December 2008 — 5.1 percent
January 2008 — 4.4 percent

Unemployment in Connecticut:
January 2009 — 7.9 percent
December 2008 — 6.6 percent
January 2008 — 5.4 percent

Unemployment in the U.S.:
January 2009 — 8.5 percent
December 2008 — 7.1 percent
January 2008 — 5.4 percent

Number of people employed in the Danbury area:
January 2009 — 67,600
December 2008 — 68,200
January 2008 — 70,300

Ridgefield EMS get new Lucas CPR Assist Device

By Susan Tuz
STAFF WRITER

RIDGEFIELD — Ridgefield EMS first responders will be able to use the latest cardiopulmonary resuscitation equipment as they rush patients to the hospital following cardiac arrest.

The Ridgefield Fire Department recently purchased a Lucas CPR Assist Device, an automated CPR unit that is placed on the patient and provides measured, repeated chest compression. It is left on the patient until he is in the hospital.

The device frees the EMT to give injections, clear airways and administer other lifesaving procedures without having to stop chest compressions.

"We're very excited," said Ridgefield Fire Chief Heather Burford. "This device is going to improve patient rescue outcomes, and it takes Ridgefield to another level of patient care."

Burford and her EMS team spent six months trying out and evaluating two manufacturers' models of CPR assist devices. The department purchased the Lucas model for \$13,000 with money it received from the estate of William Frazee in 2007.

"The latest science tells us that compressions in CPR are the single most important factor in patient rescue in cardiac arrest situations," said Jerry Myers, ambulance supervisor in Ridgefield.

Please see CPR on A5



Ridgefield firefighter paramedic Brett Rinehart demonstrates the department's new Lucas CPR Assist Device. The device will help EMS first responders treat cardiac arrest while freeing up their hands to perform other life-saving tasks.

CAROL KALIFF/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

200 sign petition to halt sale of New Pond Farm cows

By Susan Tuz
STAFF WRITER

REDDING — When nine cows and calves left New Pond Farm on Saturday for Vermont, it raised the level of concern for Jeanine Herman, a farm association member opposed to reducing its herd.

For the past few years New Pond Farm, a nonprofit environmental education center, has sold milk and yogurt and cheese made on site.

When the board informed New Pond members by letter in February it had decided to sell of most of the farm's 22 cows and four calves, and a group of concerned members voiced their opposition.

Herman has led the drive to save the dairy herd. Wednesday, at the farm's board of directors meeting,

Udder outrage

The reduction of the dairy cow herd at New Pond Farm from 22 cows and four calves to just eight cows is not being taken well by all of the education center's membership. A petition signed by 200 Redding residents opposed to the move will be presented to the farm's board of directors Wednesday.

she will present a petition signed by 200 Redding residents requesting that the animals be kept.

"We know their endowment took a hit with the economic downturn on the stock market," Herman said Monday.

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