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Hundreds of gay couples wed across California

BY LISA LEFF • ASSOCIATED PRESS • JUNE 18, 2008

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AUTUMN CRUZ/Sacramento Bee

Robert Rushing, left, and Tim Hawkins, of Sacramento hold their marriage licenses in the air Tuesday after receiving them at the Sacramento County Clerk Recorders Office.



HECTOR MATA/AP

SAN FRANCISCO — Wearing everything from T-shirts to tuxedos and lavish gowns, hundreds of same-sex couples rushed to county clerks' offices throughout California to obtain marriage licenses and exchange vows as last-minute legal challenges to gay marriage failed.



All 58 counties began issuing licenses Tuesday following an order from the state's highest court.

San Diego County, typically a Republican stronghold, added four walk-up windows and assigned 78 employees to issue marriage licenses, up from the usual 19. It issued 230 licenses on Tuesday, breaking its previous single-day record of 176 on Valentine's Day 2005.

At the West Hollywood City Hall, George Takei — who played Sulu on the original "Star Trek" — beamed as he and his partner of 21 years, Brad Altman, obtained one of the new gender-neutral

marriage licenses — with the words "Party A" and "Party B" instead of "bride" and "groom." They are planning a September wedding.

"I see before me people who personify love and commitment," a grinning Takei told the crowd. He flashed the Vulcan hand salute from "Star Trek" and, in a twist on the Vulcan greeting from the TV series, said: "May equality live long and prosper."

There were scattered demonstrations outside some offices and courthouses, and courts in Sacramento and San Francisco rejected separate bids by groups seeking to halt same-sex marriage.

"It's something to just pray about. It's not a time to be joyful," 16-year-old demonstrator Juliya Lyubezhanina said as she watched dozens of balloon- and rainbow flag-carrying couples.

One conservative activist said an effort to pass a constitutional amendment in the fall that would outlaw gay marriage again in California could fail if opponents came on too strong.

"The major media would love to see us engage in fierce protests and hostile demonstrations of outrage against the licensing of same-sex 'marriages,'" said Ronald Prentice, chairman of the ProtectMarriage.com coalition. "Our battle is not against the same-sex couples who are pursuing the opportunity to 'marry' granted them by the activist judges on the California Supreme Court."

Some couples came from out of state. Unlike Massachusetts, the only other state to legalize gay marriage, California has no residency requirement for a marriage license. Many gay activists are likening the moment to the 1967 Summer of Love, when young people from across the country converged on California in what came to be regarded as the birth of the counterculture.

Actor George Takei, left, and his partner Brad Altman sign documents as they get their marriage certificate permit Tuesday in West Hollywood, Calif.

PHOTO GALLERIES

Gays marry in California

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In a shady plaza in Bakersfield, where the county clerk stopped officiating at marriages altogether rather than preside over same-sex ceremonies, newlyweds wearing Cinderella-style gowns and matching tuxedos were showered with rose petals while a photographer who set up on a park bench offered to snap wedding portraits.

Although some couples said they preferred to wait until after the election because they feared their marriages would be nullified at the ballot box, others said they wanted to make history, especially if the opportunity to get married could be lost.

"There's a window, and we want to take advantage of that window, because who knows what's going to happen in November," said Jay Mendes, 40, as he and his partner of three years, Vantha Sao, 22, waited to obtain a marriage license in West Hollywood.

A recent Field Poll showed that Californians favor granting gays the right to marry 51 percent to 42 percent. It was the first time in 30 years of California polling that the scales tipped in that direction.

In a sign of the growing political support for same-sex marriage, the Los Angeles City Council president, the mayor of Sacramento and at least two state lawmakers agreed to officiate at the weddings of staff members and friends.

On the steps of San Francisco City Hall, a gay men's chorus sang while supporters handed out cupcakes. Inside, Helen Zia, 55, and Lia Shigemura, 50, of Oakland, sang "The Chapel of Love," their voices echoing through the marble halls. They wore orchid leis from Shigemura's home state of Hawaii.

"This is the most meaningful day of my life. I've always wanted to get married," Shigemura said. "I just never thought it'd be possible."

Associated Press writers Elliott Spagat in San Diego, Gillian Flaccus in Santa Ana, Laura E. Davis in West Hollywood, Garance Burke in Bakersfield, Malia Wollan in Martinez, Don Thompson in Sacramento, and Juliana Barbassa and Evelyn Nieves in San Francisco contributed to this report.

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