

Anti-bias measure up again

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SANTA CRUZ — An ordinance that would ban discrimination will come before the City Council for the fourth and possibly final time this Tuesday.

“I don’t want to have to keep going through this, but we’ll keep fighting as long as we have to fight,” said lesbian activist Merrie Schaller. “We’re really, really tired.”

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The three-month-old ordinance has been rewritten several times and discussed for more than a dozen hours during public hearings and meetings.

It no longer contains the most controversial language, which protected people regardless of the way they dress or groom themselves and it embraces Councilman Neal Coonerty’s idea of enacting gay rights legislation similar to what was vetoed last year by Gov. Pete Wilson.

The latest draft, prepared by a five-member committee, bans discrimination on the basis of age, race, color, creed, religion, national origin, ancestry, disability, marital status, sex, gender, sexual orientation, height, weight or physical characteristics.

Height and weight are the only categories included in the ordinance that are not necessarily protected by other state or federal law, and Councilman Louis Rittenhouse says those items remain a sticking point for him.

“Anybody can claim they were discriminated against because they were too fat or too thin or too tall or too short,” he said. “This could open a Pandora’s box.”

Rittenhouse is fairly certain the ordinance will pass in its current

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form, and he said he is pleased with most of the changes that have been made.

“I think the sad part is that when this ordinance first came out it was so outlandish that it caused a great deal of damage to the image of Santa Cruz,” he said. “I think that if it had come out in this form, there would have been a lot less hysteria.”

Prior hearings and public meetings on the proposed law have brought out representatives of a wide range of public interests, ranging from Christian fundamentalists to body-piercing advocates.

Schaller, who has been organizing gay and lesbian activists to attend the meeting, says many people are dreading the event because the last public hearing included a good deal of disparaging testimony about homosexuals.

“I know there are a lot of people who don’t want to go,” she said. “Last time I heard people speak who think it is OK to say in public that we are sick, we are a danger to the family, we don’t deserve our rights, we want something special, we’re going to burn and that we can’t be loved the way we are.”

The council has agreed to hear public testimony for 90 minutes, and they have scheduled the hearing at the Civic Auditorium to ac-