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SACRAMENTO, Calif. (ABP)—California legislators have narrowly defeated a bill that would have made that state the first in the nation to legalize same-sex marriage legislatively.

The 37-36 vote in favor of the bill, although a narrow majority, still was four votes short of the 41 needed for passage in the California Assembly. While all the chamber's minority Republicans voted against the bill, a handful of Democrats either voted against it or abstained.

Last year, Massachusetts became the first jurisdiction in the United States with legalized same-sex marriage. But that action was the result of a 2003 Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court decision that said the commonwealth's policy of marrying only heterosexual couples violated the Massachusetts Constitution.

California courts are considering a similar lawsuit. The state's voters

approved an initiative in 2000 that explicitly bans gay marriage.

Gay-rights advocates promised not to give up in California, generally considered one of the nation's most socially liberal states.

And while opponents of same-sex marriage counted the vote a surprising victory, they also warned that more battles lie in the future.

"We've avoided this particular bullet, but more attacks on marriage are coming from judges in San Francisco," said Randy Thomasson, president of Campaign for Children and Families.

"The people of California are learning that to keep everything about marriage for a man and a woman, they absolutely must pass a true-blue state constitutional amendment to override the politicians and judges who have such blatant disregard for marriage and the voters."

Governors in two other states have vetoed gay-rights bills passed by their states' legislatures.

Colorado Republican Gov. Bill Owens vetoed a bill that would have banned private employers in the state from discriminating on the basis of sexual orientation. Colorado already bans discrimination on that basis for state employees.

Owen said he feared the bill would unleash a tide of litigation, but opponents noted no state employee has filed a sexual-orientation discrimination complaint against Colorado's government in the past five years.

A week before, Maryland Republican Gov. Robert Ehrlich vetoed legislation that would have expanded the ability of gay couples to make medical and financial decisions for each other.

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