



Saturday, May 13, 2006

Second funeral bill passes

Legislation backs up prior bill

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JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. — The long march of a bill that would limit protests at funerals came to a second and final successful end Friday, a mere 15 minutes before the 2006 session ended.

The bill, by Rep. Martin Rucker, D-St. Joseph, bans picketing within 300 feet of funeral sites within an hour before or following the ceremony. The bill was inspired by a protest last August at the funeral of Spc. Edward Lee Myers, the first St. Joseph soldier to die in Iraq.

Mr. Rucker's bill is essentially the second act of a play he and Sen. Charlie Shields, R-St. Joseph, began last December, when they first filed similar bills.

Mr. Shields' version of the bill was signed by the governor earlier this year and immediately put into effect. However, it set no specific distance limits for demonstrations, raising concerns that it might be unconstitutional.

It also had a more immediate shortcoming. Mr. Shields' language barred protests in front of a "church, cemetery or funeral establishment." But funerals at others sites weren't specified, which became apparent last month when the Westboro Baptist Church of Topeka, Kan., picketed a military funeral held at a school in Eugene, Mo.

The Westboro church is the same group that protested in St. Joseph, inspiring the bill in the first place. The group has used military funerals across the country as a platform to say that soldiers' deaths in Iraq are divine retribution for America's tolerance of homosexuality.

Mr. Rucker's bill attempts to fix both problems. It is different enough from Mr. Shields' version that they would exist as separate statutes in state law. Should the law that sets no distance limits fail, the law containing the 300-foot provision would serve as a fallback measure.

In addition, it amends the statute created by Mr. Shields' original law to include any site where a funeral is held.