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## Democrats attend 'pastor's briefing'

By [Alison Knezevich](#)

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CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- Several Democratic state lawmakers met with pastors from around West Virginia Tuesday as part of a panel organized by a religious group that opposes gay marriage and abortion.

Sen. Mike Oliverio of Monongalia County and House Majority Leader Brent Boggs of Braxton County attended the Family Policy Council of West Virginia's "pastor's briefing" at Stonewall Resort in Roanoke.

State Treasurer John Perdue and Sen. Bob Plymale, D-Wayne, had also agreed to participate, but couldn't make it, said council leader Jeremiah Dys.

A posting on the council's Web site described the briefing as "a daylong challenge to pastors to speak Truth to power, so power will speak the Truth."

It was intended to teach pastors about the political process if they want to get involved in it, Dys said.

"We recognize that a grand majority of the families of West Virginia are in church on Sunday morning," he said. "Pastors are called on to articulate these issues to their congregations. Some view that as political; and others, as I do, view that as cultural engagement."

The council "advocates for policies that embrace the sanctity of human life, enrich marriage, and safeguard religious freedom," according to its Web site. It works to "advance, defend, and equip West Virginia's families."

The group generated several controversies earlier this year. In February, it ran an Internet ad that got national attention by comparing people who support gay marriage to snipers targeting families.

Both Boggs and Oliverio said they didn't know about it.

"They probably crossed the line in that regard," Oliverio said when the ad was described to him.

In March, the council targeted House Judiciary Chairwoman Carrie Webster, D-Kanawha, and Delegate Barbara Fleischauer, D-Monongalia, in a telephone campaign. The group claimed the two women were blocking a ban on gay marriage. At the time, Webster said the campaign led to the harassment of her staff, even though her committee didn't even have the bill.

Boggs said the phone campaign "was certainly a concern" for him.

"As majority leader, I wanted to make sure that [the event] wasn't targeting any individuals or any individual views. And I heard nothing to that effect yesterday," he said. "I know that there's always a lot of friction and a lot of controversy between the sides of very emotional issues, the abortion and the gay marriage issue."

The lawmakers said they talked to the pastors briefly about noncontroversial subjects.

"At least while Sen. Oliverio and I were there, the question was, how do they communicate their concerns to their legislators," Boggs said. "Certainly, I heard nothing that was inflammatory."

The 100 or so pastors at the event were "interested in talking about the relationship with legislators and how to be involved with the political process," Oliverio said.

"These are people that care deeply about their congregations and their communities," he said.

Both Oliverio and Boggs support amending the state constitution to define marriage as between a man and a woman. House Republicans unsuccessfully tried to force a floor vote on a resolution against gay marriage during this year's legislative session.

Dys had also invited House Speaker Rick Thompson, D-Wayne, and Senate Judiciary Chairman Jeff Kessler, D-Marshall, to speak at the panel, he said.

An invitation didn't mean the lawmaker agrees with the council's positions, Dys said. Kessler has pushed hard for legislation to protect gays and lesbians from discrimination in housing and the workplace.

Plymale didn't return a call seeking comment.

Asked why Perdue -- who is widely speculated to be a candidate for governor in 2012 -- was invited, Dys said, "We have a lot of connections with a lot of politicians, including legislators and politicians in other branches of government.

"And it happens that John Perdue is one of those politicians that we have a connection with," he said.

Perdue spokesman Nelson Sorah said many groups ask the treasurer to speak at their events, and that Perdue usually talks about programs his office runs.

But Sorah said he wasn't sure what the treasurer would have discussed with the pastors. "Other than them being taxpayers, and talking about the programs [his office sponsors], I'm not sure what he would have addressed," he said.

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