Bath Sides Now

Bay gays revisit once-closed issue

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San Francisco's bathhouses, once steamy labs of erotic experimentation and viral vectors of unrivaled efficiency, were run out of business at the peak of AIDS panic in 1984, when the Department of Public Health (DPH) outlawed locks on cubicle doors and required all spaces to be monitored by club personnel. Now, after years of unsuccessful attempts to reverse the regulations, a contentious coalition of activists—loosely led by Queer Nation's Michael Petrelis and including AIDS dissidents ACT UP/San Francisco—has reprised the songs of a generation ago by decrying the lockdown as homophobic and launching a ballot campaign to reopen the baths.

"What gave the city the right to say gay men can't go behind closed doors?" asked Jonathan Klein of the Community United for Sexual Privacy (CUSP), which formed in 1997 to oppose the regs. "The DPH shut the baths without an iota of science. There's been no evaluation of whether it was an appropriate health measure, and it's taboo to revisit it." Further steaming up the issue, he added, is ACT UP/San Francisco. "Unfortunately, some of those who have jumped on the bandwagon have lumped this together with their cause—that HIV doesn't cause AIDS. In my mind, that brands us as a bunch of crazies."

The camp that defends commercial sex spots does so not only under the banner of sexual freedom; they also claim that the crackdown pushes patrons further from HIV prevention efforts. For their part, health officials said they don't plan to reverse the behind-closed-door ban. "There is a 'duh' factor here," said the DPH's Dana Van Gorder. "Unsafe sex is more likely to occur in unmonitored spaces. CUSP says men are more likely to negotiate safer sex behind closed doors, but as a gay man who has participated in the scene, I find that hard to believe."

The STD Reduction Initiative requires the signatures of 10,200 bathhouse believers to put the measure on the November ballot. If that happens, the initiative must get the backing of voters beyond the gay community in order to be passed. "I think our chances are good," Petrelis said. "San Francisco at the end of the gay '90s is a perfect place to endorse safe sodomy behind doors."

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