

Ordinance mandates neutral bathrooms

By Noah Smith / New York Times News Service

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WEST HOLLYWOOD, Calif. — This city was one of the first in the nation to pass a same-sex marriage law. It was one of the first communities viewed as a haven for gay people: When the city was incorporated in 1984, a majority of the City Council members were openly gay, helping earn West Hollywood the nickname the “Gay Camelot.” Even today, it has rainbow-colored crosswalks.

Now, West Hollywood has joined the vanguard of places that are taking steps to make transgender people feel more welcome. Last week, an ordinance took effect that abolished the traditional designation of “men” or “women” on single-stall public restrooms, a bow to the requests of the sizable community of transgender people.

Restaurants and other places with public restrooms will not have to make any changes if the bathrooms have multiple stalls, but all single-stall public restrooms have to be labeled “gender neutral.” Businesses have 60 days to comply, but can do so by simply placing a gender-neutral sign on any single-stall restroom.

“Gender-specific restrooms can be unwelcoming and potentially unsafe for many people whose gender identity falls outside of traditional gender norms,” according to a news release issued by the government of West Hollywood. “Shifting from gender-specific single-stall restrooms to gender-neutral ones is a simple and low-cost way to help ensure that facilities in the city of West Hollywood are welcoming and open to all people, regardless of the way one presents or identifies their gender identity.”

In this case, the city was not entirely a groundbreaker: Washington, D.C., passed similar legislation in 2006, and in the past two years several other communities — including Philadelphia; Austin, Texas; and Multnomah County, Oregon — have passed laws requiring gender-neutral bathrooms.

“It felt like, oh my goodness, this is something that is important to do, to be inclusive and to also be a leader,” said Abbe Land, the city councilor in West Hollywood who led the effort. “We hope the rest of the country will adopt similar ordinances.”

Before passing the ordinance, city leaders consulted with business leaders who expressed concern about the costs the requirement could place on restaurants. This level of cooperation stands in contrast to the City Council’s 2011 decision to ban sales of fur clothing, which angered many local retailers.

“The chamber’s concern was that it would not be onerous on businesses in terms of costly remodels,” said Keith Kaplan, a vice chairman of the West Hollywood Chamber of Commerce. “We worked with the city to develop plans that provide safe and comfortable facilities for the transgender community.”