

# Utah hate-crimes law to get hearing after years of gridlock

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Cache Valley Daily

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Associated Press

February 19, 2019



SALT LAKE CITY (AP) — A proposal to strengthen Utah's hate-crimes law will get a hearing, marking a potential turning point for the idea long stuck in legislative gridlock, lawmakers said Tuesday.

Republican sponsor Sen. Daniel Thatcher said the bill will be publicly discussed on Thursday, and he's confident that a panel of lawmakers will approve it.

"It was very difficult, it was a long road and we still have a long way to go," he said. The full Senate may be a tougher sell, though Thatcher said he remains hopeful it will pass. The plan's future had been in doubt, but Thatcher says revisions to include protections for more groups of people have helped convince his colleagues to support it.

The news comes days after a video showing a man in Salt Lake City allegedly punching a stranger because he was gay gained widespread attention online. Police are now in contact with a suspect, though he has not yet been formally questioned, police Detective Greg Wilking said.

Lawmakers say the timing is coincidental, and the proposal has been gathering momentum since the November beating of a Latino man.

The legislation previously stalled out in 2016. Supporters said its chances were hurt when The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints released a statement urging legislators not to upset a balance between religious and LGBT rights. Most lawmakers are members of the faith. Church officials said this year they don't oppose the legislation that would create enhanced penalties for people convicted of targeting someone because of their sexual orientation, race, religion or other factors.

Utah's current hate-crime law doesn't protect specific groups, and prosecutors have said it's essentially unusable.

Critics of the plan include the American Civil Liberties Union of Utah, which expressed concerns Tuesday about whether it could infringe on free speech and provisions calling for longer prison sentences could set back efforts to reduce the prison population.

If Thatcher's proposal passes what's expected to be a tight vote in the full Utah Senate, it'll move to the state House of Representatives.

Republican Rep. Lee Perry said he expects it to have a good chance of passing there. "This is what the people of Utah are telling us they want," he said.