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## Bill to Restore Voting Rights Gains Ground

by Amy Biegelsen

Civil rights advocates took a small but significant step toward restoring voting rights to nonviolent felons last week.

Virginia forces convicted felons to surmount a bureaucratic tangle before they regain the right to vote. A bill approved by a subcommittee in the House of Delegates marks the first step in a lengthy process toward restoring voting rights automatically. Richmond-area Delegates Frank Hall, Delores McQuinn and Joe Morrissey are among the co-sponsors.

Some version of the bill has passed the Democratic-held state Senate for several years running — Sen. Yvonne Miller introduces such legislation annually — but while it typically clears that chamber it rarely finds its way out of the Republican-controlled house.

The issue gained attention last summer when nonprofit groups worked with the Secretary of the Commonwealth to orchestrate a major push to help felons file for reinstatement before the presidential election in November. Their efforts seem to have caught the attention of legislators in the lower house.

"I think I might vote for that bill," says Delegate John O'Bannon, a Henrico County Republican sitting on the full Privileges and Elections Committee. "It's sort of an equity issue." In November, O'Bannon's usually staunchly Republican district went 49 percent for Barack Obama and he's drawn a challenger for the fall, University of Richmond professor Tom Shields.

The subcommittee approval is a hopeful step for advocates. To allow the General Assembly to pass a law that would automatically restore voting rights — rather than requiring a pardon from the governor as state law requires — the Virginia Constitution must be amended. If this measure passes the full legislature, an identical bill must pass again next year, and then must be approved by voters in a statewide referendum.