An American Indian Tribe in Washington state has adopted a law recognizing gay marriage, making it only the second tribe in the country known to do so.

The Suquamish Tribal Council voted Monday to extend marriage rights to same-sex couples on its reservation near Seattle, after the measure gained support from more than 100 tribal members at a meeting this spring.

The new law allows the tribal court to issue a marriage license to two unmarried people, regardless of their sex, if they’re at least 18 years old and at least one of them is enrolled in the tribe.

It will be up to other courts to decide if unions granted under the Suquamish ordinance will be recognized elsewhere in Washington, said the tribe’s attorney, Michelle Hansen.

Gay marriage is still illegal in the state, but the Legislature this year approved a measure recognizing same-sex unions from other jurisdictions, which include other states. State lawmakers also have approved a so-called “everything but marriage” law, granting same-sex couples many rights.

The change in tribal law came after a four-year campaign by a lesbian tribal member, 28-year-old Heather Purser.

“I wanted to feel accepted by my tribe,” Purser said Tuesday. “I was expecting a fight to be ugly. But I was so shocked. I guess I was expecting the worst out of people. I was expecting the worst out of my people.”

Purser came out to her family when she was 16 and decided to campaign for gay marriage in her tribe after college. She approached the Tribal Council, which she said was supportive but not encouraging. She said council members told her to talk to elders about the issue and assign a tribal attorney to work with her.

But Purser became discouraged, thinking the tribe was taking too long. She moved to Seattle, to a gay-friendly neighborhood, where she met her partner.

Purser, who is a seafood diver for the tribe, returned to the reservation in March, this time intent on voicing her campaign to the people at the annual general membership meeting.

She stepped to the microphone and repeated her plea for the tribe to recognize gay couples. Tribal Council members said they would continue considering it. She sat down. But people around her encouraged to stand up again. She then asked for a voice vote.

“Everyone said aye. No one said nay,” Purser said. Her father and brothers looked on.

“I’m proud that she stood up for herself and took a stand. You bet,” said Heather’s father, Rob Purser. “A father’s main concern is that your children are happy and you do what you can to help them.”

Suquamish Tribal Chairman Leonard Forsman said Heather Purser’s lobbying helped the issue jump to the top of the council’s priorities.

“I’m just happy that we’re able to get the work done that will allow the same rights and privileges to all people, regardless of sexual orientation,” Forsman said in a telephone interview with The Associated Press. “It was a process that took longer than expected. We have a lot competing needs.”

Hansen said other jurisdictions will have to decide whether to uphold same-sex unions performed on the Suquamish’s reservation.
The Coquille Indian Tribe on the southern Oregon coast is the only other tribe that recognizes same-sex marriage, said Matthew L.M. Fletcher, a law professor at the Michigan State University/Indigenous Law Center.

The Coquille adopted its law sanctioning gay marriage in 2008. Most tribal law doesn't address the issue. In 2005, efforts to grant marriage rights at the nation’s largest tribe, the Navajo, were defeated.

Same-sex marriage licenses also are granted by New York, Connecticut, Iowa, Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Vermont, plus Washington, D.C.

The Suquamish Tribe has about 1,000 enrolled members, according to its website. Its reservation is on the shores of the Puget Sound, about an hour from Seattle. The city of Seattle is named after its most famous member, Chief Seattle, who led a confederation of tribes in the first half of the 1800s.

While Heather Purser lobbied for marriage, she said she's not yet taking that step. But her victory has helped her deal with many personal issues.

"I have a lot of bitterness inside of me," she said. "Ever since (the vote), a lot of that pain is just gone."

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