

City gays want to set up information centre

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Hamilton's growing gay and lesbian community wants a downtown centre where they can meet and share information.

It's part of a grassroots movement to bring the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community closer together and forge stronger ties with the city.

A number of other tactics, including teaching gay issues in schools, a youth hotline for gay and lesbian teens, sensitivity training for city employees and an educational brochure will be discussed at a public meeting on Oct. 17.

Hamilton Pride, representing gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgenders, will hold the meeting from 7 p.m. to 9 p.m. at the Hamilton room at the Central Public Library.

"The community is growing," said Lyla Miklos, spokesperson for Hamilton Pride. "We're trying to take the fractured bits and get into a cohesive whole. Just like any other unique community, we have special needs and issues that need to be addressed."

Eight members of the community met with Mayor Bob Wade at his request in August to discuss how the city could assist gays and lesbians.

It was the first of what is expected to be regular quarterly meetings with the mayor.

"This is a progressive group and it wants to move forward," said Wade. "They're part of our community ... and their rights should be respected as the rest of Canadians. I wouldn't support special rights, but I'd support equal rights."

As a result of the discussions with the mayor, Social and Public Health Services are looking into what resources can be made available to provide information and support to gay and lesbian teens. The health unit, which currently has no such programs, met with representatives from the community last week.

"We're looking for something similar to the Kids Help Phone," said Miklos. "The councillors on the phone would help youth with coming out (as gay) because it's a pretty scary process."

The move towards better relations between the city and the gay community is significant because 10 years ago former mayor Bob Morrow refused to proclaim the first gay festival in Hamilton. In March 1995, the Ontario Human Rights Commission ruled Morrow's refusal discriminated against homosexuals.

Wade says the new city will include the gay community's events in any publications promoting Hamilton organizations.

However, it won't help create a community centre. Wade says he's received a number of similar requests from other groups and there isn't enough money to provide each of them with their own space.

"We're really not able to do that," he said. "They have to look after identifying a site and fundraising."

The gay community hasn't approached the public or Catholic school boards about teaching gay issues.

"It's a fairly sensitive issue," said Ilze Dreimanis, chair of the public secondary school principal's council in Hamilton. "In terms of the curriculum it's not something that's overtly dealt with."

She said each school has a code of conduct emphasizing tolerance and respect. There are also guidance councillors and public health nurses to provide information or help to teens.

"In no way are we condoning or promoting it as a lifestyle," said Pat Daly, chair of the Catholic board. "But we clearly believe all people are created in the image of God and are to be loved and respected."