

Hamilton Queers Hoot, Laugh At Cops' Story

By Tanya Gulliver

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An emergency meeting Aug 5 about a bathhouse raid raised more questions than it answered.

The public information session was called by the Hamilton Police Service in response to concerns from the queer community over an Aug 3 inspection of The Warehouse Spa And Bath that saw two patrons charged with committing indecent acts.

About 40 members of Hamilton's queer community attended the Aug 5 meeting to hear an explanation of why Hamilton's Multi-Agency Task Force (MATF) swooped down on 14 establishments in Hamilton, including the Warehouse and Show World, a peep show often patronized by gay men. The day after the raid, police spokesperson Gregg Bullock said the Warehouse was the only gay establishment on the list, which included mostly restaurants, bars and massage parlours. Show World had also been visited two days earlier.

The charges at the Warehouse included two individuals who were charged with indecent acts. A third unidentified criminal charge was laid during the visit to Show World.

"There is a feeling that there is such a thing as homophobia going on -- that people don't like the fact that there are men having sex with men in such places," said playwright Sky Gilbert, a member of the Hamilton's Gay Lesbian Bisexual Trans (GLBT) Advisory Committee.

Yet most members of the panel - which included representatives from fire, city police, the Ontario Provincial Police, by-law enforcement and public health - claimed that they didn't know what a bathhouse was, and that they had no idea, until the controversy arose, that the Warehouse was intended to be a safe space for gay men to have sex with other men.

These claims were met with hoots of laughter and derision from the audience.

"I really think that after this incident, trust has been badly damaged and fractured," said Lyla Miklos, acting chair of the City's GLBT Advisory Committee. "I'm utterly confused and mystified to hear so many of you say, 'We didn't know that was a bathhouse,' 'We didn't know that was a place where men have sex with men.'"

Acting police chief Tom Marlor told the meeting that the MATF did not go to the Warehouse to charge men who were having sex there.

"But when we found men were having sex we had to charge them," said Marlor. "It's against the law and that's what we did.

"The law is clear about having sex in a public place. We cannot turn a blind eye to criminal offences."

The attendees seemed to be divided into two camps: those who were worried about the attack on a queer space, and those who were worried about the seemingly unlimited and unrestricted power of the MATF. Marlor said the MATF was formed in May of 2000. "It was designed to deal with problem by-law infractions, premises that cause difficulties in the neighbourhoods, bars that were having difficulties.... It was designed to respond to complaints and in general terms, 99 or so percent of visits that they make are as a result of complaints."

Yet no one on the panel would identify what those complaints were for the Warehouse. In fact, only one member of the panel had even taken part in this most recent series of raids, which saw 91 charges laid at 14 different establishments.

"It's not appropriate to address the nature of the complaints in a public forum when we haven't discussed it with the owners," said Judy Downey, the city's coordinator of standards and licensing. She did confirm that the city had received numerous complaints about the Warehouse prior to the MATF raid.

The panel also tried to clarify some of the rumours circulating about the raid.

Art Spelic, a public health inspector who was at the raid, disputed the claim of Warehouse staff that unclothed men were exposed to female police and inspectors.

"There were no females around when the individuals were undressing. They were given privacy," said Spelic.

The police also confirmed that no one's cars were towed, and that the charged individuals were released at the scene and drove off.

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