

Cops monitoring website led to gay bathhouse check

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Police were monitoring a gay cruising website when they found complaints that led to a controversial inspection of a gay bathhouse.

Those comments, about unsanitary conditions, prompted a task force made up of police and several agencies to inspect The Warehouse Spa and Bath on Main Street West last week, resulting in two arrests.

The visit has enraged members of the city's Gay Lesbian Bisexual Transgender community who say they feel targeted.

The complaints, which include lack of hydro and hot water and the presence of extension cords and candle lights, were not formally submitted to police. Deputy Chief Tom Marlor said a complaint about a smoking infraction on the premises was submitted to one of the agencies.

He said police monitor the cruising website periodically because they received a complaint about its content. Other websites, which aren't exclusively gay, are also monitored, he said.

"When we look at the website, we see all these complaints. We didn't go to the website to find complaints."

The Warehouse was inspected by the multi-agency task force, comprised of police, the health department, city building and licensing, and the fire department, among others. The two men arrested were later charged with committing an indecent act.

Lyla Miklos, acting chair of the city's GLBT advisory committee, was stunned to learn the source for some of the complaints was a website.

She chaired a meeting yesterday at City Hall that allowed community members to vent and come up with solutions.

"Even if they found something on (the website), why couldn't they call the owners and tell them?" said Miklos, echoing the concerns of many over the mass inspections by the task force. Some questioned the legitimacy of a comment left on a website message board.

Marlor said no complaint can be corroborated until it is investigated.

"The gay community seems to feel that we've targeted them and I'm trying to break that perception."

The Warehouse owner Jamie Bursey said an electrical malfunction that happened about 10 days ago did leave a section of the building without hydro and hot water. Those areas were closed temporarily and members informed of the closure as they walked into the premises, he said. Extension cords were running in the basement while repair work was being done, but that area was also closed, said Bursey. The problem has been fixed.

He said there are tea lights everywhere -- "Ambiance. It had nothing to do with hydro. Any regular customer coming through would be able to tell you that," Bursey said.

The Warehouse closed for two days this week to install new security measures, such as a security window and cameras at the entrance, and a P.A. system that informs members if an inspection is taking place.

"That's about as much as we can possibly do to protect the members of the club," Bursey pointed out.

The need for more security at bathhouses was raised by a man at yesterday's meeting.

Others wondered why the two men were charged for sexual activity in a space that police had often directed men to.

Marlor explained that the two men charged with indecent acts were charged because they were partaking in sexual acts "in the view of others." The act was taking place in a common area, with more than two people present, says Marlor.

"It's not an offence if they were behind a locked door," he noted, adding that heterosexual couples engaging in similar activity in a similar space would have also been charged.

But Miklos was disturbed at the number of officials who claimed not to know what a bathhouse is or what kind of activity goes on in it.

All those at the meeting agreed it's time to educate both the task force and the GLBT community. That means making sure the definition of a bathhouse and the kind of activity that takes place there is understood. Bathhouse owners should learn what activity is legal so they can inform their customers, and should know how to handle similar situations in future, such as asking for names or badge numbers of officers.

Advisory committee members committed themselves to pushing for a response from the city and police.