

A task force out of control?

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Xtra!

Aug 19, 2004

When Hamilton's Multi-Agency Task Force (MATF) was created in May of 2000 it seemed like an ideal solution to deal with the city's crack houses and other problem establishments. A multi-jurisdictional team with seemingly unlimited powers to enter locations to unearth a multitude of infractions; MATF could at last bring landlords to task.

Fast-forward four years and residents now realize that providing enforcement officials with carte blanche might not be ideal - particularly when there is no oversight, no reporting requirements and no one in charge.

"The amount of power that the Multi-Agency Task Force has is just frightening, and it's very intrusive," says Lyla Miklos, acting chair of the city's Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual Trans (GLBT) Advisory Committee. "I don't think anyone knew anything about the MATF before this happened."

The Aug 3 raid on the Warehouse Spa And Bath and two other gay establishments has drawn attention to MATF's activities, particularly within Hamilton's queer community.

At each of the three community meetings held since the raid, participants talked about feeling targeted since the queer community was hit three times in one night (there are fewer than 10 queer- oriented businesses in Hamilton).

Attendees expressed concern that police are using the excuse of protecting by-law enforcement officers to enter premises without a warrant, something that led to two men being charged with committing indecent acts at the Warehouse.

Most people at the meetings are furious that bathhouse sex is under attack once again. Given that police often direct men caught having sex with other men in public parks to go to a place like the Warehouse, community members also wonder about the hypocrisy of a police service that would then raid that same establishment.

"When police start raiding sexual spaces that are thought to be safe, then that's not a safe place anymore," says Ian Jarvis, a regular bathhouse patron. "Nobody is going to want to go back there. People who are in the closet - and there are a whole lot of them in Hamilton - get pushed back into the closet. They end up moving to unsafe places - public washrooms, parks. There is no other place to go to explore their sexuality."

Sky Gilbert, a member of Hamilton's GLBT Advisory Committee, says the biggest problem is that the current operational procedure is driven by complaints.

"It is very dangerous that with a complaint-based process, which can so easily be homophobia or a personal vendetta, a complaint about a by-law infraction can end up with the police at your door with no search warrant. They just walk right in," says Gilbert. "I told [Police Chief Brian Mullan] that I thought this was very scary - too much police power."

Other business owners are wondering if they'll be next.

Damien Dommer, co-owner of the bar The Werx, says the task force hit his business about seven months ago.

"If there is a problem with my premises, come and talk to me, don't raid me," Dommer told members of the MATF at a public information session organized by the police. "You don't need to rule the businesses by fist."

Dommer is frustrated that police are no longer focussing only on problem establishments. Yet they don't conduct such raids in most mainstream establishments.

"How many Burger Kings have you raided?"

Judy Downey, the city's coordinator of Standards And Licensing, says there is no way for officials to know if a complaint is legitimate until they check it out.

The GLBT Advisory Committee is offering to provide cultural competency training to city staff who participate in the MATF. The public outcry has caused MATF members to examine their operation; it's having a meeting to reassess its mandate and process.

But is it the same old tune? Given that the GLBT Police Task Force was originally formed in 1997 in reaction to Project Rosebud - a police gay sex sting operation at the Royal Botanical Gardens - there is apprehension that Hamilton has now taken a couple of big steps backward.

Gilbert has attended all three public meetings. He was very disappointed in the presentation at the third meeting, which saw the first public presentation from Mullan, who was on holidays when the raid happened.

"It was just what I expected. Very anger-making and full of bullshit," says Gilbert. "He said basically that the police were just doing their job... they were not targeting the gay community."

Miklos also expressed disappointment in the level of expertise exhibited by senior police officials.

"I think this was good that it happened because now we're having the discussion but to have two deputy chiefs be so obtuse on the issue was a little disconcerting. Why don't they know about [the existence of bathhouses]?"

Det-Sgt Dave Calvert, with Hamilton's vice and drugs squad, says he is surprised by the outcry over the Warehouse arrests. Yet when asked if he now understood the concerns being raised by the community, Calvert asked this reporter to enumerate them for him.