

# Community members planning 'sit in' protest at Hamilton police board meeting

Hamilton City Council voted to appoint retired Zip Signs president Fred Bennink as the sole city appointee to the seven-member board.

NEWS 07:42 PM by [Nicole O'Reilly](#) The Hamilton Spectator



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Disappointed community members are planning a "sit in" at Thursday's Hamilton Police Services Board meeting to protest a recent city appointment they say is a "missed opportunity" to increase diversity.

Late last month, Hamilton City Council voted to appoint retired Zip Signs president Fred Bennink as the sole city appointee to the seven-member board — the remainder includes three city councillors and three provincial appointees.

The announcement [spurred swift criticism from community members](#) who had been hopeful a more diverse candidate with lived experience would join the mostly white, male board. Several community members stepped forward to say they had applied, including diversity advocate Evelyn Myrie and Ameil Joseph, a social work professor at McMaster University.

Lyla Miklos, who is helping organize the sit-in, also applied and was interviewed. She says the interview lasted less than 10 minutes and included broad questions about finance and why she wanted to be on the board.

Miklos, is a member of and has been an activist for the 2SLGBTQIA+ (two spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, plus) community, said her answers centred on applying an "equity and inclusion" to board governance — a lens she believed at the time was being applied to the selection process.

But now she feels misled, said Miklos, who was also a candidate for Ward 1 in the last municipal election.

"I don't think you wanted someone to come in with a critical eye; you wanted the status quo," she said.

On Thursday, members of marginalized communities and their allies are being asked to go to council chambers for the 1 p.m. meeting and sit in the gallery. Some may bring signs, with the overall idea being to send a message that the community is not happy with the selection process.

Those speaking publicly in opposition say their intention is not to criticize Bennink but, rather, the process. He was selected by a hiring committee made up of city councillors.

According to his profile posted on police board website, Bennink was the owner and president of Zip Signs for 35 years, was an auxiliary officer for Hamilton police and has board experience for multiple community and charitable organizations.

Cameron Kroetsch — also a member of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, who plans to attend Thursday, and was Ward 2 municipal candidate — said the city's appointee is a citizen's "only shot" to get onto the board.

It is "not a secret" that there is tension between police and some marginalized communities, he said. Having more diverse representation on the board brings that lived experience to conversations and also allows community members to see themselves represented.

The police board is in charge of governance not the operations of the police service, but they can "set the direction" for the organization, Kroetsch added.

There are communities who don't trust police, people who don't call them when they need help and who do not feel welcome at a police board meeting, Miklos added.

She previously participated in a gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered (GLBT) Hamilton police task force that she says sparked productive dialogue between the community and police, but that task force ended about a decade ago.

Mayor Fred Eisenberger, who is police board chair, said he hopes with future appointments there would be more consideration of diversity.

"I hope and wish for better diversity going forward from both the province and the city," he said, adding that they should try "in every way possible" to reflect the Hamilton community as it stands.

Eisenberger wasn't on the selection committee but said he sees no reason to "second guess the process" for the latest appointment.

He also points out there are some diverse board members — provincial appointee Pat Mandy is a member of the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation, and Coun. Tom Jackson is Armenian.

Eiseberger said he would consider stepping down from the board himself in favour of increasing diversity — in a year or two.

Kroetsch said he would like to see the latest appointment revisited but also hopes that any future decisions apply an equity and inclusion lens.

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