

Critics of lack of diversity on Hamilton police board say they're not going away

Samantha Craggs · CBC News · Posted: Apr 12, 2019



Lyla Miklos says there were diverse candidates who were also the best qualified for the job. Not choosing one is a statement on "whose lives matter" to the board. (Samantha Craggs/CBC)

Critics who say the city missed an opportunity to add diversity to the Hamilton Police Services board say they're not letting the matter drop.

About 20 people held "representation matters" signs at a police services board meeting Thursday, a protest of what they say is a lack of voices from marginalized communities on the mostly white, mostly male board.

The city's new appointment of someone who fits that description, they say, happened despite there being diverse candidates who were overlooked, but just as qualified for the job.

Lyla Miklos, one of the organizers, says the group plans to present at future police board meetings, as well as future city council committee meetings.

"This is the start of many actions to follow," she said.



Protesters did a quiet sit-in at a Hamilton Police Services board meeting. (Samantha Craggs/CBC)

"We're very disappointed that as much as the City of Hamilton says they're doing work with an equity and inclusion lens, this doesn't seem to be happening when it comes to appointing citizens to sit in citizen appointee roles."

The police board has taken some heat in recent years over how it's handled issues around racial and gender diversity.

The board grappled with how to handle street checks, also known as "carding." Data from 2015 shows racial minorities were more likely to be stopped multiple times in one year. Police say they've all but phased out the practice now.

Last year, the Ontario Civilian Police Commission disciplined then-chair Lloyd Ferguson, who isn't on the board anymore, for comments he made about Matthew Green. Green, who was the city's first black councillor, had launched a complaint at the time for what he said was an improper street check against him.



Ken Stone was among about 20 residents who held signs in protest. (Samantha Craggs/CBC)

The police service also revealed last year that 70 per cent of sexual assault cases investigators deemed to be unfounded actually weren't.

The seven-member board is currently six men and one woman. Coun. Tom Jackson is of Armenian descent, and Patricia Mandy, the sole woman, is Indigenous.

The province recently appointed Robert George Elms, a former colonel in the Canadian Armed Forces. The city, after looking over 22 applicants, appointed Fred Bennink, the retired president of Zip Signs.

Other applicants included Miklos, an LGBTQ activist who's served on numerous boards and committees, as well as diversity consultant Evelyn Myrie and Ameil Joseph, a McMaster University assistant professor of social work who has criminal justice experience. Joseph has also interned at Waterloo Regional Police.



The board, from left: Fred Bennink, Robert George Elms, Tom Jackson, Chad Collins, Pat Mandy, Don MacVicar and Fred Eisenberger. (Samantha Craggs/CBC)

Bennink, who is a former auxiliary constable, said he applied because he's interested in public safety, which is "important to everybody in the community."

"I will do my best to serve all areas of the community on the police board."

Mayor Fred Eisenberger chairs the board. He said Bennink is a fine addition, although he wanted to see some diversity too. City council's selection committee chooses appointees, and city council ratifies their decisions.

"I don't think they're at all wrong," Eisenberger said of the protesters.



"I will do my best to serve all areas of the community on the police board," said Fred Bennink. He's the retired president of Zip Signs, a Burlington-based sign company. (Samantha Craggs/CBC)

"I'm well aware of their desire. I've also been advocating for greater diversity on the board. Unfortunately it didn't happen through these appointments."

The good news, he said, is that Hamilton Police Service's officers and civilian staff are more diverse than ever.

The city has no plans to revisit the decision.