

# Residents object to proposed Cardus takeover of Balfour House

**Some LGBTQ residents and allies argue the faith-based think tank promotes anti-gay writings on its website — an accusation denied by Cardus.**

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*Three residents have filed letters with the city objecting to the proposed Cardus takeover of Balfour House. - Gary Yokoyama , The Hamilton Spectator file photo*

The city will consider a proposal from Cardus to lease a Mountain heritage building — over the objections of residents who argue the faith-based institute's website hosts anti-gay or Islamophobic content.

But uneasy councillors have asked staff to report back on whether the city has the legal right to deny a lease over such concerns before making a final decision on Balfour House.

The think tank went public recently with an unsolicited proposal to set up shop — and take over an estimated \$3 million in costly repairs — in the historic, 24-room mansion also known as Chedoke Estate. The pitch comes three years after the city rejected a Cardus bid to buy another Mountain heritage gem, Auchmar Estate.

The latest proposal resurrected resident concerns about writings hosted on the Cardus website that critics have labelled anti-gay and anti-Muslim.

Cardus president Michael Van Pelt argued otherwise in a letter to council that said the Christian think tank encourages "respectful and thoughtful discussions" and promotes a "open and tolerant society."

Several councillors admitted Wednesday they felt some published work on the Cardus website could be considered homophobic or Islamophobic.

But it is unclear whether council can legally reject a business proposal from an outside organization "because its views are not congruent with our stated values," said Coun. Brad Clark, who asked for a legal report back from the city solicitor.

Coun. Sam Merulla noted some of the articles he viewed could have been shared in a "sermon" among major religions. He asked whether the city should not partner with the Catholic church or Indwell, a Christian housing agency. "It's a slippery slope," he said.

Mayor Fred Eisenberger said he "struggled" with the concerns brought up by residents, and emphasized his commitment to equity and diversity at the city. He also noted elements of some major religious groups hold opinions he does not agree with on gay marriage and the right to choose, for example.

"It does challenge us all to think about what is our role and responsibility as a municipality."

Council ultimately voted 13-2 (opposed were Nringer Nann and Maureen Wilson, while Terry Whitehead was absent) in favour of at least reviewing a proposal from Cardus — although several members made clear there is no guarantee such an agreement will go ahead.

The decision still disappointed LGBTQ community member Lyla Miklos, who stayed to watch the debate.

She argued council has both the right and responsibility to make decisions about city lands and leases "looking through the lens of equity and diversity."

"I think this speaks to the bigger picture issues we are struggling with as a city in terms of hate in Hamilton," she said.

Ruth Cameron also wrote to ask council to "refrain from welcoming known right-wing, anti-LGBTQ think tanks," arguing partnering with the organization is at odds with the city's values of inclusiveness.

Van Pelt argued in a letter to council the organization complies with the city's equity and inclusion policy, as well as the provincial human rights code and Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

"All of the work we undertake seeks to promote the dignity of every person, regardless of age, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, physical ability, race or creed," he wrote.

It will be several months before city staff evaluate a formal proposal from Cardus and report back to council.

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