

# Police board approves external review of Hamilton Pride response

Probe budgeted at \$600K and will be completed before next year's celebration.

Oct 11, 2019 by Teviah Moro The Hamilton Spectator



*Hamilton police detain a man at a Hamilton PRIDE event in Gage Park on June 15. The police board has approved an external review of the forces' response at the event. - John Rennison, The Hamilton Spectator*

Hamilton police will hire an external lawyer to conduct a review of how the force responded to violence at Pride celebrations in June amid criticism from the LGBTQ community and its allies.

The police services board agreed Thursday to set aside \$600,000 in the 2020 budget for a probe that's to be completed before next year's celebration.

Mayor Fred Eisenberger, who is chair of the board, said he's "very supportive of the approach" proposed by a subcommittee tasked with exploring options. "I think timeliness is an important factor in this. We don't want this to go on for years."

On June 15, white nationalists and Christian anti-LGBTQ demonstrators crashed the celebration at Gage Park waving signs with homophobic slurs. Masked counter-protesters positioned a large fabric screen in front of them. Kicking, punching and shoving broke out.

The LGBTQ community and its allies have complained about police's late arrival to the park to quell the violence — and how they have handled the fallout since.

At Thursday's meeting, Fred Bennink said the police board will select a legal counsel well-versed in such reviews "soon," but didn't offer a specific date.

He said the board "will not direct" any part of the review, which is to be driven by community input.

"Our hope is that through this, relationships can be healed, and we can have more meaningful relationships."

Michael Demone, who has addressed local officials on the topic before, said he thought the board made the right decision.

"I'm happy to hear that it was unanimous, and I'm also happy to hear that they think that the community impacted should be involved. That's extremely important and something that has been absent from this entire conversation since the episode at Pride."

Demone said that how the process unfolds will be under the microscope. "Every item of fairness, bias and impartiality is going to be scrutinized, so I hope they think carefully about that."

Cameron Kroetsch, a Pride board member critical of the police response, said he hopes the LGBTQ community can direct the shape of the review, but he expressed doubts. "Up until this point, I haven't

seen a lot of transparency in general from the Hamilton police services board (and) a willingness to dialogue with communities."

Kroetsch also questioned what "kind of meaningful response" could happen with a review-completion deadline of June 2020, which is around when Pride happens.

Lyla Miklos agreed, noting she has helped organize past celebrations. "Things just became a big mess this year. So to not have it be a big mess, there really needs to be some conversations happening much sooner than June."

But Miklos said she's "happy" the board's following through with an independent review after city councillors Nrinder Nann and Maureen Wilson recommended a probe in summer.

The decision to opt for external counsel comes after the Office of the Independent Police Review Director said it wasn't up to the task. In an Oct. 1 letter to the board, OIPRD director Sylvana Capogreco called such a review "very important" but suggested its scope would stretch her office's resources.

Another option before the board was to hire a retired justice at an anticipated cost of \$2 million and a timeline that would stretch beyond next year's Pride festivities.

After the meeting, police Chief Eric Girt declined to comment on the board's unanimous decision.

"There's no reaction. This is the purview of the board and they decided to do that investigation. I'm open, as you know, I've talked about it before. That's the board's decision."

In recent weeks, Girt has apologized more than once for comments he made to CMHL radio host Bill Kelly that have worsened the already-damaged relations with the LGBTQ community.

One was a suggestion that police would have deployed their resources differently had the Pride organizing committee accepted uniform officers participating in the Gage Park festivities.

The OIPRD has also received four individual complaints about officer conduct at the June 15 festival. It's probing one of them, but has referred the others back to Girt.

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