

Hamilton city council supports hub pitch for marginalized communities

Toronto's city-funded LGBTQ community centre could be model for Hamilton

By Teviah Moro
The Hamilton Spectator
Nov 7, 2019



Several speakers gathered at city hall on Wednesday to urge elected officials to support their colleague Ninder Nann's pitch to create a safe space in Hamilton. - Gary Yokoyama, The Hamilton Spectator file photo

The city will start exploring a multi-purpose hub for Hamilton's diverse and marginalized communities amid rising concerns over discrimination.

On Wednesday, councillors gave staff marching orders to start seeking public feedback on what services might be provided, what sort of building should house the centre and how it could be funded.

Several speakers gathered at city hall to urge elected officials to support their colleague Nrinder Nann's pitch to create a safe space in Hamilton.

"Let us carve out a model of civic leadership that others will envy and want to follow," Lyla Miklos told councillors.

Miklos said the city's LGBTQ community tried to establish such a hub 18 years ago, but it didn't gain traction at city hall.

Now, years later, there's still just a "patchwork" of support services for marginalized groups in Hamilton, she noted.

A central location where people could collaborate and share common experiences is needed, Miklos said. "We need a space to feel safe and call home."

Nann said it's "high time" the city establish a "robust strategy" to move toward a hub, which speakers noted could take a page from The 519, a municipally supported centre in Toronto for the LGBTQ community.

The renewed push for a safe central meeting space comes during a time of unease over overt displays of xenophobia and anti-LGBTQ sentiment in Hamilton.

Anti-immigration rallies have been held in the city hall forecourt, while white nationalists and extremist preachers crashed Pride celebrations at Gage Park in June waving anti-LGBTQ signs. A counterprotest formed to block the display and violence ensued.

A recent Statistics Canada study found Hamilton had the highest rate of police-reported hate crimes among census metropolitan areas in Canada in 2018.

"I think this has become a pressing issue," Kojo Dampsey, interim director of the Hamilton Centre for Civic Inclusion, said Wednesday. "The purpose is to bring people together ... to talk about differences and similarities."

Michelle Poirier, who identified herself as a human-rights professional and concerned queer parent to two small children, told councillors an independent group should "anchor" a hub because "many have lost trust with your leadership."

Poirier also reserved a remark for Mayor Fred Eisenberger: "You will not rebuild trust with our communities until the charges against the Pride defenders are dropped," a reference to counterprotesters arrested after the Gage Park clash.

Clearly upset by the remark, Eisenberger replied by saying as head of the police services board he has no power to do so. "I have nothing to do with the charges I cannot dismiss charges. I cannot lay charges."

Coun. Terry Whitehead chimed in, calling Poirier's comment an example of "extremism" and chided meeting chair Coun. Maureen Wilson for allowing the remark to go unchecked. "You didn't correct a very strong, pointed shot at our mayor."

Wilson, who seconded Nann's motion, glared at Whitehead from the podium but held her tongue and opted to move on with the meeting.

Al Fletcher, manager of neighbourhood development, said it would be difficult to estimate the potential costs of a hub, funding sources and the space it would require without knowing what services the community wants.

Staff are expected to report back with an update to council in the second quarter of 2020 for review and consideration.

tmoro@thespec.com

905-526-3264 | @TeviahMoro



Teviah Moro is a reporter and editor with The Hamilton Spectator and thespec.com. He lives in Hamilton's east end and joined The Spectator in 2011 after working at other dailies in Ontario. Moro covers a variety of topics, including housing, homelessness and politics. He is also Friday night assignment editor. Moro is an Ontario Newspaper Award winner and National Newspaper Award finalist.