

Pride report puts Hamilton police Chief Eric Girt in hot seat

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The author of a scathing independent review of how Hamilton police responded to violence at Pride and the service's fractured relationship with the LGBTQ+ community stops short of analyzing whether the top brass needs to be replaced.

But lawyer Scott Bergman's report, which found police's handling of anti-LGBTQ+ disrupters at the June 2019 celebration at Gage Park "inadequate," doesn't sidestep the crucial role Chief Eric Girt plays in leading the police service during a time of deep crisis.

The chief "sets the tone for the entire" police service "and how it is perceived throughout Hamilton and beyond," Bergman writes about damaging remarks Girt made on a local radio program just days after extremist preachers and white nationalists crashed Pride.

Nearly a year after the cataclysmic event, on Thursday, the police services board will discuss Bergman's review alongside an internal investigation that concludes complaints against the service were "unsubstantiated."

That second report, by Det. Sgt. Gary Heron of the professional standards branch and required by the Office of the Independent Police Review (OIRPD), focuses largely on police's operational response to the clash of June 15.

Members of the LGBTQ+ community and allies were outraged at police's late arrival to the park to quell a brawl between the disrupters and "Pride Defenders," who used a large fabric banner to block the homophobic signs from celebrants in the park.

Bergman's review dissects the police deployment, too — noting an operational plan was drafted only two days before the event — but also takes a deeper dive into the systemic issues that strained the service's relationship with the LGBTQ+ community before, during and after last year's Pride festivities.

The reports come during global upheaval over a police officer pressing his knee into the neck of George Floyd, a Black man, until he died in Minneapolis. George's death and a rash of others in police custody have galvanized calls for defunding police budgets and reallocating money to other services.

Those who hold up the independent review as the only credible report out of the two say it speaks to Hamilton police's failed leadership and a stagnant governance board unwilling to respond to complaints for years.

"What's written in this report are things that communities have been saying for decades," said Cameron Kroetsch, an organizer of last year's Pride celebrations. He has called for Girt's resignation but says the service's relationship with the LGBTQ+ community can't be healed with his departure alone.

"Whether the chief resigns or not is not going to change outcomes for communities," Kroetsch said. "This is a system of policing. This isn't down to the resignation of one person. They'll simply promote someone internal from the Hamilton police to replace him."

Leadership and organizational issues

For Tina Fetner, an associate professor of sociology at McMaster University who specializes in LGBTQ+ politics, Bergman's report highlights two problems for police.



The first is that Hamilton police has “a particularly fraught relationship with the LGBTQ+ community.”

But, perhaps more surprising, was how much the report revealed “dysfunction” and “lack of organizational capacity” at the police service, she said.

“Obviously, the police chief needs to take absolute responsibility for this whole endeavour and especially for his comments after the events that were offensive and misinformed and showed a real lack of connection with the LGBTQ community.”

For instance, Girt’s remarks about sex in public washrooms during a CHML radio interview which focused on police’s relationship with the LGBTQ+ community resulted in a “sense of irreparable betrayal and a deep loss of trust” for most review participants — despite his apology, Bergman found.

Fetner also pointed to small examples in the report that she said revealed serious organizational issues: an email address not being forwarded; officers on the ground not having a map of Gage Park or being told where the protesters were the year before; organizers not having the phone numbers for officers on the ground.

The responsibility comes down to leadership, she said: “How is it even possible somebody that made the kinds of statements that Chief Girt made ... how is he still in charge?”

Community relationships and police reform

The police chief and Mayor Fred Eisenberger, police board chair, alike “repeatedly” ignored opportunities to repair relationships with hurting community members in the aftermath of last year’s violence, said LGBTQ+ activist Lyla Miklos, a former Pride celebration chair. “They lost the moral authority to lead on this long ago ... They should have stepped down already.”

Girt became chief in 2016 after serving as deputy chief for 10 years under outgoing top officer Glenn De Caire. At the time, the then-54-year-old identified the service’s priorities as “building relationships” and “maintaining the public trust.”

He has declined to comment on the reports until the board formally receives them on Thursday. Eisenberger has also reserved comment until then.

Bergman’s review was informed by input from 42 community members, 24 police officers and civilian staff and other submissions earlier this year after the police board hired him in October with a budget of \$600,000.

It makes a series of recommendations — including a formal apology by police, a better prepared operational plan, a diversity audit, enhanced media training for top brass, and in-depth seminars on Two-Spirit and LGBTQ+ issues.

Fetner said the recommendations are a “positive step” but added they’re only “nibbling around the edges” of what’s needed. That’s because the police organizational structure is “incompatible” with serving the LGBTQ+ community.

What’s needed is police reform, Fetner said, adding that in her research she’s examined cases where it’s been done before, including in the 1970s, after the Stonewall riots following police raids in New York City.

Critics have pointed to how the police board has failed to cultivate a diverse membership, leaving the voices of racialized and marginalized communities on the sidelines.

MP Matthew Green, who witnessed the violence at Pride, said Wednesday the board’s leadership has been “under question for quite some time” but its members have taken no “meaningful action” in response to that feedback.

“Regardless of the issue, whether it was street checks and carding, or violence at Pride, or dealing with homeless populations, or dealing with domestic violence, it is clear that there needs to be a change in not only the style of the leadership, but in the leadership itself.”

Praise and criticism for Girt

Coun. Lloyd Ferguson, who stepped down as board chair in 2018 and lamented the abolition of arbitrary street checks, said Wednesday he had the “utmost respect” for Girt.

“Everybody can be a Monday-morning quarterback on this stuff, and I think he made what he thought was the right decision at the time and now everybody’s going to judge what he did, and that’s one of the problems of being a leader: your decisions get questioned over and over again.”

But Ferguson said the police board is hamstrung with more than one review of Pride. “I just think it’s unfortunate they got two reports and they contradict each other and now they’re caught.”

Criticism of police leadership also comes from within the ranks as the board considers Bergman’s review and OIRPD report.

“We’ve identified issues and attempted to address them with the chief and board,” police association president Clint Twolan said. “We’ve been frustrated with the lack of action and moved to alternative avenues.”

He declined to elaborate on the “alternative avenues” the union has sought. Twolan noted he hasn’t complained specifically about anything related to the events of Pride in 2019.

However, he recalls being pressured to comment after the fallout, particularly after Girt’s public comments about police not being invited to the festival. These comments “fanned the flames.”

But Twolan said he was kept in the dark about how or why police responded the way they did. He said it shouldn’t be on the police association to respond to things the police service — and the chief — ought to.

He said Bergman’s report highlighted that the individual officers on the ground during Pride “did everything they could.”

The issue is leadership, said Twolan, who also contended there is a more radical, anti-police minority within the LGBTQ+ community that contributed to the problems.

Bergman's review, however, in more than once instance, suggests the negative sentiment isn't limited to a small fringe, noting in particular that immediately after Pride, "many felt as if the (Hamilton police) did not care about their community ..."

Twolan is hopeful "a relationship that can be rebuilt." But if there is a "conflict of personalities," he encourages people to "look at the greater good" and "remove themselves or adjust."

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With files from Matthew Van Dongen

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