

Chief and police board apologize for failure at Pride, accept 'blueprint for renewal'

LGBTQ activists say they're not optimistic about real change

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Hamilton's police board has accepted 38 recommendations from an independent review into violence at the 2019 Pride festival. (Youtube/Scotsmanstuart)

Hamilton's police services board says it "sincerely and unreservedly apologizes" and will implement all 38 recommendations from a damning report into the conduct of police before, during and after Hamilton's 2019 Pride festival.

An apology was also offered by Chief Eric Girt, as the Hamilton Police Services (HPS) board voted unanimously to accept the advice of Scott Bergman, a Toronto lawyer who spent months compiling a report about the violence that happened at the June 15, 2019 Gage Park celebration.

Bergman said the lack of planning meant police "failed to protect the public" at the event where several people were injured. His recommendations include working with organizers before the 2021 event, apologizing to the community, and looking at making the LGBTQ liaison officer a full-time position.

Bergman also recommended more LGBTQ-focused training, giving more support to the internal network of queer and trans officers and employees, and doing a diversity audit of the service, among other suggestions.

In a statement the board said "We accept criticism and feedback and will listen and learn from the Two Spirit and LGBTQIA+ communities in Hamilton."

Chief Eric Girt will report back to the board with a plan to implement the recommendations.

"We accept criticism and feedback and will listen and learn," said Mayor Fred Eisenberger, board chair, in a prepared statement.

"As chief, I take full responsibility for what happened at Pride before, during and after," Girt said. "I apologize to the community for inadequate planning and preparation for Hamilton Pride 2019."

Girt also said he "was sorry for statements made during and after the event that created the impression our response would have been different had we been invited... The lack of communication with Pride organizers before, during and after the event was unacceptable."

Girt also addressed perceptions about the fights that took place at Pride 2019. He said "any statements made during and after Pride that suggested there was a moral equivalency between those who sought to spread hatred and those who were defending the celebrations were wrong."

Despite the report being highly critical of the force's actions, its leadership and culture, there was little debate or discussion and little questioning by board members of Bergman.

Bergman admonished Girt for comments he made after Pride

The incident happened last June, when religious protesters bearing homophobic signs and a loud speaker arrived at the festival, along with protesters in yellow vests. A group of people wearing pink masks — many of them self-described anarchists — used a large black curtain to block the protesters from view. Violence broke out and several people were injured.

Bergman found that while planning should have been more thorough, officers did their jobs properly when they arrived on scene. None of them stood around and watched crimes being committed, he said.



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Chief Statement

June 11, 2020

With every crisis comes opportunity and this report marks a blueprint for the future of our service. It presented a candid and stark reflection of what took place last June. At the same time, this report was necessary.

As Chief, I take full responsibility for what took place at Pride before, during and after. I apologize to the community for inadequate planning and preparation for Hamilton Pride 2019. We can do better. We must do better. I am also sorry for statements made during and after the event that created the impression our response would have been different had we been invited. Hamilton Police Service is committed to ensuring public safety where everyone is respected and protected, regardless of whether we are asked or invited to participate. That is our job - to serve and protect. The lack of communication with Pride organizers before, during and after the event was unacceptable. Upon reflection, any statements made during and after Pride that suggested there was moral equivalency between those who sought to spread hatred and those who were defending the celebrations were wrong.

I acknowledge that our relationship with the Two-Spirit and LGBTQIA+ communities has been significantly damaged as a result of what took place at Pride 2019. We recognize it will take years to rebuild our relationship and earn your trust.

I am committed to doing the hard work required to rebuild and restore the trust that has been broken. I will ensure our members receive education and training provided by those with lived experience to meet the expectations of our community. Many of the recommendations are focused on changing the culture of our organization. I will work with the community to make this change a reality. This is the only way forward.

We will dedicate the necessary time and resources to realize the vision set out in this report. That journey begins today.

Eric Girt, Chief of Police

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Bergman admonished Girt's post-Pride comments where he said police would have deployed differently if they were invited to the festival and allowed to have a recruitment booth.

Bergman was optimistic about the future of the relationship between HPS and the LGBTQ community. Many community members he talked to, he said, were interested in having a better relationship, and senior officers also had a "strong desire" for that.

"This report is designed to provide a blueprint for renewal," Bergman said.

Not everyone sees it that way. Lyla Miklos, an LGBTQ rights advocate, says comments during the meeting show that the board members are committed to the status quo. No one wants to change the power centre of HPS, which according to Bergman's report, is conservative, heterosexual, white and male.

When criticized, "they get defensive. They get protective about their turf, and 'how dare you criticize me?'" she said. "There's no critical analysis happening at that leadership table."

The apology, she says, is "a meaningless statement with no sincerity to it and no real action plan."

Cameron Kroetsch, a Pride Hamilton board member, said the whole meeting was "a terrible spectacle," also citing a report to look at a 20-per cent budget cut, largely to appease supporters of the Black Lives Matter movement. Many board members said they don't actually want the cuts to happen.

"It was very out of touch with what was happening in the world right now," Kroetsch said. "If you're not listening now, you're not listening ever."

Bergman's report also said HPS should sit down with Pride organizers well in advance of next year's festival. Eisenberger didn't attend the Pride festival last year, but said he's "open to going to any celebration where I'm welcome."

"One of the things that has been challenging for the last little while is that I have not been exactly welcome into the event by some organizers."

"I'm prepared to work with anyone who is prepared to sit at the table and work through issues."

The board also discussed a separate internal report today that was submitted to the Office Of Independent Police Review Director, which concludes Hamilton police followed protocol and prepared a proper operational plan.

Bergman said his report was broader in scope, and also looked at cultural issues, not just procedural ones.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Reporter

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