

## Hamilton police chief apologizes over Pride failure but is 'not resigning'

By Teviah Moro

The Hamilton Spectator Reporter

Thu, June 11, 2020



Hamilton's police chief says he's sorry about the force's "inadequate" preparation for last year's violence-marred Pride festival and pledges to work toward repairing broken trust with the LGBTQ community.

"We can do better. We must do better," Chief Eric Girt said during a police services board meeting Thursday.

But Girt's public apology and another from the board ring hollow for those who view the top brass and members of the governing body as the main obstacles to healthier relations with the LGBTQ community.

“It’s insincere,” Lyla Miklos, a queer feminist activist, said about their statements. “There’s no real change.”

Girt and Mayor Fred Eisenberger, chair of the board, issued the apologies after lawyer Scott Bergman presented his independent review of how police responded to homophobic-fuelled violence before, during and after last June’s festival.

Members of the LGBTQ community and allies were outraged at the late arrival of police to Gage Park to quell a brawl between the disrupters and “Pride Defenders,” who used a large fabric banner to block the homophobic signs from celebrants.

“Their activities could reasonably have been anticipated by police, but they weren’t. As a result, the police response was inadequate both before, during and after the event. This added to the distrust in some circles,” Bergman told the board.

The “crisis” offers a chance “for lessons to be learned” and a “new relationship to be forged” between police and the community. “It’s not going to happen overnight, but this report is designed to provide a blueprint for renewal.”

But in an interview, Miklos argued the chief and mayor must resign as a part of any meaningful change in the police service. “I don’t think they want critical voices,” she added about the police board’s membership. “They want rubber-stampers.”

Michael Demone, a graduate student who lives in Hamilton, also said he hopes Girt resigns in light of Bergman’s “damaging” report. “And I’m hopeful that the findings of this report will help a movement that is looking at reallocating funds from police services to community organizations and communities at risk.”

Girt and Eisenberger told reporters they had no plan to leave their posts.

“I’m not resigning. I have acknowledged the hurt and harm,” Girt said. He and senior command have review Bergman’s report “with an open mind” and are committed to changes.

Eisenberger said the “electorate will make a decision in 2022, or I will, one way or the other.”

He added the board has no desire for Girt to resign. “The chief has been a great chief, by and large. A failing in this area, he’s admitted to and apologized for. None of us are perfect.”

Bergman's independent review offers the board and service 38 recommendations to help heal the "damaged" relationship with the community and ensure police can ensure safety from anti-LGBTQ aggression.

During his presentation, he said police failed to consult and communicate with Pride organizers and waited until two days before the festival to draft an operational plan for Gage Park.



He also addressed comments Girt made on a local radio program in the aftermath, in which the chief suggested police were in a "no-win situation" because Pride organizers had not invited officers to the festival.

The message — whether intended or not — was "seen as an abdication of the service's essential function to serve and protect," the lawyer said.

In his apology, Girt said was he was sorry for his comments. "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."

Reading the board's collective statement, Eisenberger said it "sincerely and unreservedly apologizes to the Two-Spirit LGBTQIA+ communities for the events connected to Pride 2019 as they transpired."

"We accept criticism and feedback and will listen and learn from the Two-Spirit and LGBTQIA+ communities in Hamilton."

The board also voted unanimously to accept all 38 recommendations in Bergman's report and asked police staff to report back with an implementation plan in September.

Among the recommendations are a formal apology, better operational plans, a diversity audit, enhanced media training for top brass, in-depth seminars on two-spirit and LGBTQ issues and creating a full-time LGBTQ liaison solely dedicated to that file.

Coun. Chad Collins asked Bergman how the independent review's conclusions could have differed so much from those of an internal probe by Det. Sgt. Gary Heron of the professional standards branch, which found Pride-related complaints against the service were "unsubstantiated."

Bergman said the internal report required by the Office of the Independent Police Review Director (OIRPD) examined if officers "complied within the confines of policies that exist," but noted his was a "broader-brush look" at the adequacy of policies.

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