

To: Governance Review Sub-Committee/February 12, 2020

Re: Authorize Civil Marriage Solemnization Services and To Delegate the Authority to Solemnize Marriages in the City of Hamilton

Good afternoon Councilors. Thank you for allowing me to make this short presentation to express my fear of allowing the City Clerk to perform marriages in Council Chambers.

Heritage Weddings & Coordinators (formally the Hess Village Wedding Chapel) has been performing affordable wedding ceremonies, commitment ceremonies, renewal of vows and child dedication to all couples since 1980. It is a second-generation family business.

My late father Ted Simmons, a former clergyman, worked in Provincial Court here in Hamilton as a probation and parole officer. During the 1970s he saw couples coming to court in white wedding dresses and suits and leaving a few minutes later with a look of shock at how underwhelming it was to be married at a civic court. That was when he decided to open The Hess Village Wedding Chapel in 1980. City Hall and churches were not providing Civil ceremonies and he and my mother put their modest savings together and opened Hamilton's first wedding chapel to provide wedding services to everyone in a private, dignified setting at an affordable cost.

Forty years later, we still provide small, private, dignified wedding ceremonies for all couples seven days a week, day or night at our chapel located at 100 Main Street East, a few blocks from City Hall. We provide a better service at a more affordable price than what your report proposes to do. However, we are concerned that since City Hall issues marriage licenses, couples will feel compelled to use City Hall marriage services. Especially couples who are new to Canada and do not fully understand the choices available to them. They will become a captive market.

It is unclear to me whether city hall will be advertising within this building. Will couples and their guests be cuing in the hallway or waiting in the gallery for their turn? How many guests will be allowed in Council Chambers for each ceremony? This proposal is an existential threat for us and will be sure to disrupt a locally built industry that has been serving the community well for many years.

The report mentions that people have asked the City Clerk why they cannot be married at City Hall. This question never used to be asked when the City Clerk's office gave couples a list of available wedding officiants in Hamilton along with their purchased marriage license. However, the City Clerk stopped this practice approximately a decade ago. Since then, couples have been on their own to find an officiant to marry them. We all know that part of this committee's mandate is to ensure equity of service within Hamilton. I suggest that you return to the list (virtual or otherwise) and allow all companies and individuals providing wedding officiant services in Hamilton to be on the list. This will support local providers of wedding services as well as associated spin off business.

On the other hand, if it is Council's intention to make a cash grab from people trying to make a modest living, you might also consider diversification in other ways: sell leashes to dog owners that buy dog licenses, give referrals for city contractors to those who need building permits, sell bathing suits to families that use city pools. Of course, I'm being facetious and mean no disrespect, but I hope you'll see the parallels in my argument.

In 2004, the intent of regulation 285/04 was not for municipalities to use city council space to create an enterprise for a service that is already being provided in an affordable and equitable way. It was created so that marriages could be performed in remote places where wedding services were either sparse or non-existent. The purpose was to create more equity within such a large and diverse province as Ontario.

If Council approves this direction, you will not become competition to the larger wealthier wedding venues. You'll be competing with retired ministers, sole proprietors and small businesses. Many wedding officiants are retired clergy on CPP and OAS. They need extra income to live independently. We look out for each other as a family might. I have one minister who uses his extra income from performing weddings to visit grandchildren once or twice a year. Some have lived in housing like First Place. Some are volunteer nurses and all do something to help people in crisis at home or abroad. I could go on.... We are a sector of the wedding industry that is most vulnerable to economic downturns and government interference. We have everything to lose and are not insulated by generous pensions, stock portfolios or political incumbency.

Hamilton is a city that already provides wedding services at an affordable price to all couples seeking the marriage bonds. Prices are not inflated and there is no lack of people ready to provide this service. If you compete in this manner with local officiants, sole proprietors and small businesses, not everyone will survive and some will just walk away from the service. In the long run, you could create more inequity of service while reducing the overall quality of service. What you are proposing is a significant market shift that will put our livelihoods into real jeopardy.

Thank you for considering my thoughts.

Tim Simmons,

Owner/operator Heritage Weddings & Coordinators