

Mayor and Members of Council,

I am writing today to express my dismay at Agenda Item 4.8 which highlights the Integrity Commissioner's report on a complaint lodged by council against a resident of our city. Having read the report and been made aware of the events outlined, I felt it necessary to add my voice to the chorus of disapproval. I am concerned that our local government would use powers intended to keep elected officials accountable as a weapon against a community member who expressed opinions that run contrary to those held by council's majority. Further to that, I am fearful that further action will be taken when we have, at this moment, an opportunity to step back, begin a dialogue, and work to restore the trust that has already been lost.

From 2011 to 2015, I had the honour of serving on the City of Hamilton's LGBTQ Advisory Committee. I was glad to be part of a meaningful volunteer committee that hosted some incredible events, worked to inform council about our concerns and issues, and maintained a wonderful relationship with city staff. Over the course of a few years, we helped plant the seeds of a revitalized Hamilton Pride and worked diligently to advance the cause of queer rights in Hamilton.

At the same time as I sat on the LGBTQ Advisory Committee, I remained active in our local politics. I was a frequent critic of many council decisions, expressing those frustrations online and in print. I worked actively on local partisan political campaigns at the federal and provincial level. And, importantly, I twice sought a seat on the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board: once following the untimely passing of Bob Barlow and then again in the 2014 municipal election. As an active member of Hamilton's queer community, I felt it was – and remains – my responsibility to use my skills, talents, and passions to represent both my community and my values in any way possible. For me, and for many in our community, that means being involved in electoral politics. For others, it can mean activism, community work, or a host of other causes.

So many members of the city's queer community are actively involved in politics for one simple reason: as queer residents of Hamilton, we do not have the luxury of being apolitical. We are not imbued with the same privileges that our straight, cisgender, or gender-conforming neighbours have. During a lifetime in Hamilton, I have watched hate crimes increase, discriminatory practices and misconceptions spread, and celebrations of our identities come under attack by organized, coordinated groups of violent extremists. The price of being a queer Hamiltonian is being political.

I want to stress how damaging this report is to the city's queer community and how much this further erodes trust between both queer Hamiltonians and our local institutions. In a free and functioning democracy, citizens and political leaders are free to express their reasonable opinions and values in many ways. The recommendations in this report run contrary to that ideal and will further widen the gulf between council and residents, particularly with queer Hamiltonians.

I urge council to abandon this pursuit of the present Chair of the LGBTQ Advisory Committee and to work in earnest to begin repairing the relationship between the city's queer community and local institutions. We have a chance to pull back, reflect, and work together. We have a chance to make this city a better place, a stronger place, a more inclusive place. And we can do that, together.

Thank you,

Chris Erl