



Hatboro extends discrimination protections to LGBTQ community

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HATBORO >> The borough has joined a small but steadily growing list of municipalities across Pennsylvania that has done what the state government, so far, has been unable to do – extend discrimination protections to members of the LGBTQ community.


In a 4-3 vote Monday night, borough council approved an ordinance making it unlawful in Hatboro to discriminate against a person in matters of employment, housing, commercial property acquisition and public accommodations on the basis of that person's sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression.

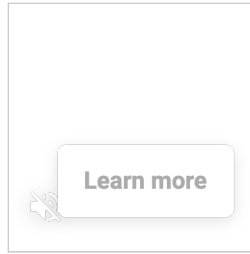
The ordinance closely mirrors the state's Human Relations Act, which already makes it unlawful to discriminate on the basis of such characteristics as race, color, age, religious creed, national origin, sex and disability and handicap.



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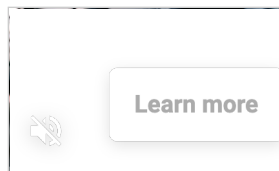




The state’s Human Relations Act, however, does not extend protections to include actual or perceived sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression. Hatboro’s ordinance does.

Efforts have been made on the state level in recent years to amend the Human Relations Act to offer comparable protections to members of the LGBTQ community, but those efforts have stalled. More than 40 municipalities across Pennsylvania have, in response, taken it upon themselves to approve their own protections for their LGBTQ citizens.

Hatboro’s ordinance was not met with unanimous support from members of the council. Voting against the ordinance were council members George Forgeng, David Rich and Robert Hegele. Supporters were board President George Bollendorf, Vice President Dave Stockton, Elle Anzinger and Nicole Benjamin.



Word of the council's consideration of the ordinance drew a large public turnout Monday night, with some residents questioning the need to offer what they regarded as special treatment for the LGBTQ community. Others said they saw the ordinance as an affront to traditional family values and Christian teachings.

"I don't see this as a human rights issue; I see this as a protection of a behavioral choices issue," said resident Frank Hierholzer, who spoke during the public comment portion of the meeting just prior to board's vote on the ordinance.

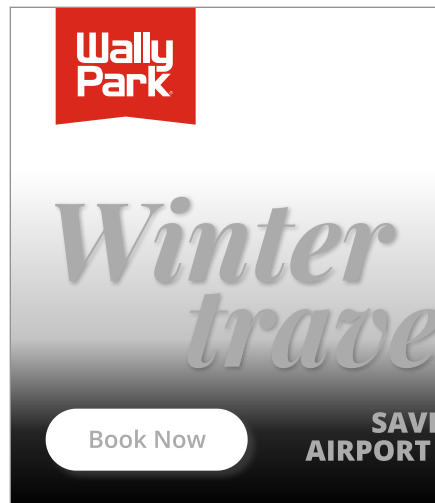
"Is the Borough of Hatboro saying that the state and the borough are currently discriminating against people within the borough? The borough has [noted] that no incidence of discrimination in past two years has been reported. So why does the borough need to introduce this ordinance other than to support the LGBTQ social agenda that will infringe upon my individual liberties?" he added.



Supporters of the ordinance at the meeting, which included members of the borough's own LGBTQ community, said the ordinance will help ensure the safety and support of LGBTQ people of all ages there.

"Over 30 percent of LGBT youths attempt suicide, compared to 6 percent of non-LGBT youths," said Jennifer Angelina Petro, who is transgender and who works for Love in Action United Church of Christ in Hatboro. "LGBT youth are twice as likely to be physically assaulted, and 92 percent of LGBT youths report hearing hateful negative messages from their schools, teachers, peers, churches and family."

“These aren’t special ordinances to me. They are common sense. They aren’t a threat to our children and church and school communities,” Petro added.



Those who opposed the ordinance on council said they did so because they believed the ordinance was either not needed in Hatboro or would present liability concerns for the borough.

“This ordinance may create unintentional consequences,” said Hegele. “Since I’m not aware of any discrimination issues of any kind, including with the LGBT community, I feel that this ordinance is not needed, and I take exception with those who say Hatboro is not tolerant and we are not a welcoming community. We are, and always have been.”

He said the issue needs to be ultimately taken up by the state.

Mayor Nancy Guerst, who has championed for a human relations ordinance in Hatboro for years, even as a former voting member of the council, said the ordinance's passage Monday was a significant moment for the borough.

"I have been fighting this issue for seven years," Guerst said after the meeting. "I've been fighting this issue my whole life. I have seen the devastation that can happen to a child that has to grow up in a world where they're not protected. This is the right thing to do. This is human rights.

"Until our community of LGBTQ individuals gets protection from our beloved state of Pennsylvania, then this must be done by the local communities," Guerst said.

The ordinance further establishes a Human Relations Commission in Hatboro that will consist of five members, each appointed for three-year terms. The commission will investigate discrimination complaints and consist of residents and business owners representing a diverse cross-section of the borough.

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