

HEADLINE: Failing the fairness ordinance sends the wrong message to LGBTQ youth in Bowling Green

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STORY TEXT:

For better and for worse, my experience as a queer teenager is tied to growing up in Bowling Green. Attending the first-ever Bowling Green Pride Festival was a life-changing experience for me, showing me a thriving, supportive community when I was struggling to discover my identity. I came out for the first time on WKU's campus, and at Bowling Green High, I've found a supportive group of friends I can safely discuss my identity with.

At the same time, I've seen my best friends face the vile depths of hatred from strangers and trusted friends alike, and while I'll admit I've been rather fortunate in my own coming-out experience, I haven't been immune from having to endure hate myself.

The fairness ordinance, as my first experience with local politics, is an integral part of that experience. I attended the meeting in 2017 where Slim Nash presented the ordinance, which would add sexual orientation and gender identity to the list of pre-existing ordinances protecting from employment and housing discrimination, for discussion. I recall the massive throng of supporters, the impassioned speakers describing their experiences and citing evidence of the harm this discrimination did, the energy that felt too massive to contain within the city hall. Every detail shaped me, in the moment and in hindsight. To my naive thirteen year-old self, the idea that any member of the city council, much less all of them but one, could see what I saw and still refuse to even consider the motion felt absurd. Their decision to fail it now, on a vote of 3-2, still feels absurd, albeit for more grounded reasons.

Members of my generation, Generation Z, are more likely to openly identify as LGBTQ than any other generation. Despite progress over the past few years, the outlook for these children and teenagers remains bleak, largely due to ostracization within their communities. The Human Rights Campaign reported that over 40% of LGBTQ youth ages 13-17 don't feel that the community they live in accepts LGBTQ people, with 68% saying they hear negative messages from elected officials about the LGBTQ community. The consequences of this are dire: young LGBTQ people experience more external stressors such as homelessness and abuse at home and internal factors such as depression and anxiety, both of which contribute to a higher rate of suicide among the community than cisgender, heterosexual teens experience. On a community-wide scale, the HRC also reports that 63% of LGBTQ teenagers say they will need to move out of their hometowns to feel accepted, twice the percentage of non-LGBTQ teens.

Not working to retain and defend such a substantial and vulnerable portion of young people is ridiculous, and the justifications, from both those who spoke against the ordinance and the city commissioners who ultimately voted against it, ring hollow in the face of fact. Of course, the typical, tired arguments of "religious freedom" came up, ignoring the fact that under state law, protections already exist on the basis of religion that this law would not violate.

Commissioner Sue Parrigin, according to WKYU's coverage of the April meeting, said she believes that a majority of Bowling Green residents are opposed to enacting a Fairness Ordinance. Not only does this not justify not protecting the LGBTQ community, it's simply not true. At both meetings, an overwhelming majority of speakers came in support of the ordinance, 24 out of 33 at the first meeting and 55 out of 85 at the second. In addition, a poll conducted on the Bowling Green Daily News website

showed that as of the date of publication, 60.3% of respondents didn't agree with the commission's decision to reject the fairness ordinance, versus 39.7% who did.

Parrigin was also quoted as saying that such a law shouldn't be enacted locally: "I'm pretty steadfast in the fact that yes, everybody needs to be treated fairly...Although, I think that if we want to pass laws that says this has to happen in the workplace or in a legal contract for an apartment or a house or whatever you want to rent, that that needs to happen at the state level." Of course, legislation opposing discrimination on such a large scale, such as the Equality Act recently introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives, would be wonderful. However, prospects for such protection seem doubtful within the near future. President Donald Trump has shown hostility to transgender people in particular, rolling back federal protections, instituting the recently-enacted ban on their service in the military, and essentially trying to define them out of existence by equivocating gender to birth sex. Governor Matt Bevin is no better, supporting Kim Davis during her attempt to deny marriage certificates to same-sex couples and urging the Supreme Court not to extend Title VII discrimination protection based on gender identity and sexual orientation. With that in mind, to push responsibility onto higher levels of government speaks less of "steadfastness" and more of deflection.

Just as Bowling Green has affected my queer experience, so too has queerness colored my experience living in Bowling Green. In many ways, my peers and I grow up in the best time to be a young LGBTQ person in Bowling Green; the fact that this ordinance came up for a vote at all reflects that. However, that only means so much when 'best' still means the allowance of discrimination based on gender identity and sexuality. As Bowling Green grows and thrives, so too will its LGBTQ community, and by choosing to ignore their needs, the City Commission takes a step backwards when forward thinking drives the very development they want to bring here.