

Group wants 'Gay Village' along small section of Bank Street

The Ottawa Citizen

Wed Mar 19 2008

Page: C2

Section: City

Byline: Dale Smith

Source: The Ottawa Citizen

Activists looking to have a section of Bank Street designated an official Village staged an "educational theatrical demonstration" yesterday, draping fabric matching the six colours of the GLBT (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered) community's rainbow flag along the street.

The proposal has been met with indifference from the city and the business community. A recent open house on the renewal of Bank Street did not even address the question of designating the stretch between Nepean and James streets as a Village.

"If the city won't put up rainbow flags on Bank Street, we will," says Jeremy Dias, founder of Jer's Vision, the group that organized the demonstration.

"Instead of being embraced by public administration and celebrated for our ideas, our enthusiasm for making the city a better place, I believe that we're really being stifled," Mr. Dias said yesterday.

"We have an opportunity to give Bank Street an identity, finally. The city is rejecting our proposal and again choosing mediocrity."

Until the open house, the city seemed open to the idea of creating a Village district, inviting members of the GLBT community to participate in the public advisory committee on the redevelopment plans.

"The response that I had been receiving was overwhelmingly positive until recently," says Glenn Crawford, who had volunteered to bring forward the GLBT community's interests to the public advisory committee.

The largest concern the proposal has raised is that these kinds of districts cannot be designated from the top down.

"I think it's a worthy idea, but I think these things require a critical mass," said David Rimmer, owner of the gay bookstore After Stonewall in the proposed Village district.

While Mr. Rimmer sees the idea of designating the area as gay or gay-friendly as admirable, he adds that "when you stop to think of it, a bookstore, a pride shop, a bathhouse and a restaurant do not a Village make."

Mr. Crawford disagrees.

"There is a Village here," Mr. Crawford contends.

"There is a strong critical mass that has developed over a long period of time. However, it isn't very visible, and that's essentially what we're trying to do, is create that visibility so that people are aware that this truly exists, to help support the businesses and organizations that are already here, and to encourage new growth."

Somerset Ward Councillor Diane Holmes contends it's still early days, and that there is plenty of time for the Village designation to happen. She also has expressed interest in having the city pay for street signs as it does along Corsa Italia -- Preston Street -- and the Chinese-lettered signs in Chinatown, although costlier banners would be another matter. "We'll see what the BIA (Business Improvement Area) has to say about it," Ms. Holmes said.

"First of all, we need a proposal, we need to see what people are interested, and hopefully sit down with some of the GLBT businesses that are in the BIA, and see what everybody would agree to."

But if a more visible critical mass is really what's needed, Mr. Rimmer said he sees only one way to make that happen.

"Close down Toronto and Montreal."