

## Follow the rainbows

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You don't need a government imprimatur to know who you are.

That's the healthy attitude of Ottawa's downtown gay community, which is showing its colours these days. Although the neighbourhood along Bank Street between Nepean and James streets has not yet been officially declared Ottawa's "**gay village**," those who live, work and play in the area are not afraid to assert their identity.

Rainbow flags, the international symbol of gay pride, have been popping up in storefront windows -- at bake shops, bookstores, cafés. Other businesses are reportedly preparing to do the same.

The initiative is the work of a grassroots committee that calls itself "The Village." The group was started up after a failed effort last year to secure an official "**gay village**" designation from the city. The group hopes that soon rainbow flags or decals will be visible on many businesses covering an area of six blocks, making clear that the district does indeed represent a demographic concentration of the kind that constitutes what other cities call might call a **gay village**.

Last year's campaign to secure the official designation failed because the Bank Street Business Improvement Association was skeptical. The association reasonably argued that this kind of branding is most effective when it comes from the bottom up, rather than the top down. Cities can declare areas "theatre" or "fashion" districts -- or whatever -- but such marketing becomes a joke if there's actually not much theatre or fashion going on.

The gay community in Centretown has therefore decided to create its own visibility, and this can only be a good thing. The city of Ottawa is often derided as a conservative and grey place, so the addition of a little colour is always welcome. A vibrant gay presence is one more square in the quilt of a diverse community.