

Mayor Stephens:

I had looked forward to sharing a few thoughts with Council about the SOGI study committee and its work, but a long established previous commitment keeps me away. Therefore, I put my observations in this letter and I would be pleased if you read it to the assembled group as part of the public discussion.

This committee, made up of 16 citizens, some recruits and some volunteers, worked diligently for several months before issuing a comprehensive report for the benefit of Council in deciding this important but controversial issue. The Springfield News Leader offered opinion articles at the time of the release of the report by Linda Leicht and more recently by Jess Rollins. They are certainly entitled to their opinion on the merits of the ordinance at hand, but I must take issue with two aspects of their articles.

First, both writers spoke as if there was only one recommendation. In fact, 7 proposals were voted on by the committee and two received majority votes. One was the ordinance amendment in its original form, with only a clarification of the religious exemption. The other was a modified version which covered housing and called for a mechanism to be put in place so that citizens would have an opportunity to report instances of discrimination, since none now exists.

In other words, the committee offers two alternative recommendations, both of which presuppose moving in the direction of more protections for the LGBT community. A third result was more like a negative recommendation. The option of sending the matter to a vote of the people received only one vote out of the 15 members. We elect legislators by popular vote, they enact laws. But the big concern was the enormously divisive campaign which could well precede such an election. It could make Springfield look pretty ugly.

Second, I didn't like the dismissive attitude those articles took about the hard work performed by the committee. The report document may be the most comprehensive study of the subject by any government entity, municipal, state, or national. A big part of the duty of this committee was to gather information for the benefit of Council, who, after all, are the elected officials and make the final decision.

All this work was done with great intellectual effort in a professional and civilized manner. You may notice there is no minority report. All the committee reports were the result of consensus, despite the fact that there was a wide divergence in the personal opinions of the members. Today's politicians could take a lesson from them. Council owes a great debt of gratitude to those citizens who worked so hard to gather information and produce a remarkable report.

J. Miles Sweeney
Chairman