

LGBTQ pride flags spur debate in small Utah town

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Justin Motley repairs Pride flags hanging in Heber, Utah on Monday, June 10, 2019. The flags have caused a stir in the 15,000-person town and beyond, drawing attention at a Heber City Council meeting, on social media and from the American Civil Liberties Union of Utah. Some of the discussion has revolved around the flags'™ message itself. But the controversy has also raised broader questions for the city about whether, and how, to determine what kind of content can be publicly displayed on city property. (Kristin Murphy/The Deseret News via AP) *(Photo: Kristin Murphy, AP)*

When Allison Phillips Belnap asked to adorn her town's lampposts with rainbow flags, she expected some critics.

"It would have been naive for me to think that there would not have been a strong possibility of some negative feedback," Belnap said. "But I just felt very moved that it was time for us . in my community, and Utah as a whole, to look past some of the older thoughts and beliefs and start saying we care more about people than we care about what happens behind closed doors."

Flags reading "PRIDE in the Wasatch Back" went up throughout Heber City at the start of June — recognized nationally as LGBT Pride Month — and will remain there for the duration of the month, city officials say. The banners were paid for through a GoFundMe campaign created by Belnap, a Heber citizen, whose request to fly the flags was granted in accordance with a city policy that lets residents apply to hang personalized banners on city lamp posts.

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Mayor Kelleen Potter, who gave the Pride flags the official stamp of approval, said she's been surprised by the volume of feedback on the matter. She said she viewed the flags as a commemoration of a civil rights issue.

"I guess I knew that there were people who might not like it, but it's turned into a much bigger issue than I've anticipated," Potter said.

Initially, Belnap, a parent to LGBT children and a member of the LGBT community herself, hoped to put rainbow flags in private yards around Heber City as part of Project Rainbow, a fundraising campaign that benefits the Utah Pride Center. But the center had run out of flags. And so Belnap came up with a backup plan to show support for her community: designing and hanging banners on the city lampposts.



Heber City Mayor Kelleen Potter poses for a portrait in front of pride flags hanging on Main Street in Heber City, Utah on Monday, June 10, 2019. The flags have caused a stir in the 15,000-person town and beyond, drawing attention at a Heber City Council meeting, on social media and from the American Civil Liberties Union of Utah. Some of the discussion has revolved around the flags's™ message itself. But the controversy has also raised broader questions for the city about whether, and how, to determine what kind of content can be publicly displayed on city property. (Kristin Murphy/The Deseret News via AP) (Photo: Kristin Murphy, AP)

The total cost came to just over \$2,500, and has since been covered through donations to Belnap's GoFundMe account. The remaining donations will go to the Utah Pride Center and Encircle, a local resource center for LGBT family and youth. No tax dollars were spent on the flags.

The positive response to the flags, Belnap said, has been "overwhelming." But the banners have also attracted critics who question whether their message is appropriate for public city streets and worry that Heber City's policy could also allow for other, more nefarious public displays in the future.

Several residents who spoke out against the banners at a City Council meeting last week said they didn't believe the flags, which they saw as a statement of support for the "political agenda of the LGBT community," reflected the values of Heber City.

Others said they agreed with the general message behind the flags — support for the LGBT community — but didn't believe the banners belonged on city lampposts.

Wasatch County Councilman Danny Goode, who spoke at the city council meeting in a personal, not professional, capacity, urged Heber City to rethink its banner policy, saying he worried about the "politicizing" of Main Street flags. Goode wondered what other kinds of viewpoints the city would be legally required to allow under the First Amendment. Would the policy also protect a Confederate flag, he asked, or a Nazi flag?

"When we sponsor things as a public entity, I think we have to be careful not to enter into a political realm," Goode said.

Belnap and Potter say the message behind the flags isn't political, but personal. As a parent of two LGBT children, Potter said she has seen firsthand the challenges that some gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender Heber residents face. Both her son, who is gay, and her daughter, who is transgender, left Heber City in the middle of high school to live with a relative out of town.

After coming out as gay in Heber City, Potter said her son experienced violence and verbal harassment, including people throwing things at him from cars and texting him threats and homophobic slurs. She's heard similar stories from others in the community.



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"I don't think people are necessarily outright mean," Potter said. "But there's a feeling when you know you're not accepted, and when people look at you as a sinner or a deviant. It does something deep to a person's sense of identity and well-being and confidence."

City officials say they have no plans to remove the flags before the end of the month, a stance applauded by the ACLU of Utah. Under the city's current policy, taking the flags down prematurely on the basis of their messaging would violate the First Amendment rights of those who put them up, according to John Mejia, legal director of the ACLU of Utah.

In a statement issued Monday, the organization said that to remove the banners because of backlash would be a "serious mistake."

"We wanted to shed some light on what the First Amendment issues were at stake in the debate and clarify that we believe that the city is doing the right thing by keeping the banners," Mejia explained in an interview.

While the Pride flags are protected by the First Amendment, Mejia noted, so indeed would be a Confederate flag or Nazi flag, as Goode had wondered.

While Potter said she can't imagine anyone in Heber City requesting to hang Confederate or Nazi flags in the streets, she believes the city will need to revisit its banner policy in the near future. The Pride flags may have been the first lamppost banners to cause controversy, but Potter says she doubts they'll be the last, especially in light of the attention and backlash they've received.

"Part of it is just the evolution of a small town," Potter said. "We haven't had the issue come up before, so we haven't addressed it yet."

Some of the debate over the banners, Potter believes, might come down to how people define "pride." For some people, she says, the word may bring to mind the loud, flashy spectacle of a parade. When the mayor sees the rainbow flags on the streets of her city, she has a quieter, more peaceful vision — of "a community of caring people showing kindness and acceptance for marginalized people who haven't been accepted in the past." "I'm hoping people will see it as that," Potter said, "and not as something controversial to take sides on."