

Chambersburg Repeals Nondiscrimination Ordinance LGBTQ Advocates and Allies to Keep Fighting for an Inclusive Chambersburg

CHAMBERSBURG, Pa. — Last night the Chambersburg Borough Council voted along party lines in a 7-3 vote to repeal the nondiscrimination ordinance the previous council had adopted in 2021. The ordinance was inclusive of protections based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and veteran status — which are not explicitly protected under state law.

The Pennsylvania Youth Congress condemns the actions of the Chambersburg Borough Council in revoking their ordinance. **This is the first time in Pennsylvania an LGBTQ-inclusive law has been repealed.**

Pennsylvania Youth Congress Executive Director Preston Heldibridle said: “Chambersburg will one day have LGBTQ-inclusive nondiscrimination protections again, it is inevitable. What was avoidable was the great harm this council chose to inflict on some of their most vulnerable citizens. Many LGBTQ people will now move away, go into hiding, or experience cruel heightened hostility for being who they are.”

Over 60 members of the Chambersburg community spoke passionately in support of the ordinance, while only approximately 5 members spoke in opposition. The citizens in support of keeping the ordinance addressed how personal LGBTQ protections are to them, and how damaging it would be to lose them. Further, many speakers organized to address the massive disinformation members of the council were receiving. During Council’s discussion on the motion to repeal the ordinance, council members specifically cited patently false information.

Kirsten Stockham said, “As a member of the borough, I love Chambersburg. I love the area, my family loves the area, I have small children here. I was really excited when this passed the first time... I really thought that Chambersburg had come to a good point with going forward, and now it just feels like we're going backwards if we repeal this.”

Dawn Abraham, co-sponsor of the CASHS GSA, said, "Our LGBT community in Chambersburg is growing exponentially, and the community feelings at the high school are getting worse. Our kids are reporting that they are getting bullied, pushed down stairs, barked at, and called multiple expletives on a daily basis. By pulling your support for this NDO, you're showing our community that you don't support the schoolchildren in this community.”

Many residents worried what a repeal would mean for the future of the borough.

Terry Summers remarked, "If the NDO is rescinded, it will be the economic downfall of Chambersburg... There are people all up and down the I-81 corridor who are looking at Chambersburg and saying 'I may not spend my money there any more. I may not live there any more. I'll take my money, my business, my livelihood elsewhere.' Being the first one in the state to repeal an act such as this is not a point of pride...it is something to hand your head in shame for."

Kendra M., a local business owner, said, "Last year, in 2021, I sold 30-35% of my furniture to non-local customers. 25% of those sales were picked up at my store by the buyer. Your decision tonight will make state and national news. I don't want my non-local customers to see where my business is located and not want to

support my work. Without those 33% sales, I won't be able to keep my business year after year. My new Air BnB may not be seen as inclusive to all people."

Christine Elmer said "I'm almost 50 and a friend from college came to visit... He suggested we meet at Big Oak, because he likes to support small businesses when he's traveling, and he was traveling across the country in his Tesla. He's also a Black man, and he mentioned that he saw that Chambersburg had an ordinance, and how that was something he looked for when he traveled alone, to gauge the vibe of a town, to feel safe to know if that was a place that would be welcoming for him to visit. I think that next time he comes, if this doesn't [sic] stay, we'll probably be meeting in Gettysburg. Which is a shame."

In reaction to the overwhelming public comment in support of keeping the ordinance, Mayor Hock issued a Non-Discrimination Proclamation supporting diversity and inclusion and said he was open to a middle ground, but those words rang hollow when council members proceeded to strip the only substantive protections LGBTQ borough residents had available to them. Unlike the ordinance, the proclamation does not do anything to actually protect residents in the borough, or enshrine their right to go to court if they face discrimination. No matter how well-meaning, a proclamation is just words. Council member Alice Elia offered a path other than repeal, and asked other members if they would be open to removing or modifying certain powers of the nondiscrimination ordinance. There was an indication that several Council members might entertain that conversation. However, Council President Allen Coffman, who was presiding over the meeting, declined to recognize Council member Elia's point of order about committing the ordinance to another committee, and so the vote to repeal was held and passed along party lines. The ordinance was initially adopted in a 7-3 bipartisan vote in 2021.

The Pennsylvania Youth Congress expresses outrage at the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission and the Wolf administration for significantly contributing to the effort to repeal this vital ordinance. On both January 15 and 17 a PHRC official told local Chambersburg leaders and the Pennsylvania Youth Congress that the agency would send a letter to correct the misinformation being promoted to the Borough Council. The agency also said they would participate in a community press conference on January 20 and co-host a Town Hall on the Nondiscrimination Ordinance with PYC on January 21. They also received the formal request to have a PHRC attorney present on the night of the vote to correct the misinformation about the agency that the repeal vote was based on. Instead, the PHRC ceased functional communication with both the Chambersburg leaders and the Pennsylvania Youth Congress by Wednesday, January 18, and failed to show in the following days with no explanation. On January 23, the PHRC declined comment to WITF.

On January 24, only hours before the vote to repeal was to take place, Governor Tom Wolf posted on his social media condemning the Chambersburg Borough Council. Instead of waiting until after the vote to respond, or with a message about nonpartisan unity, he flamed the fires of political spite. His post was directly mentioned by a Chambersburg Borough Council member just before they voted to repeal the ordinance.

The Pennsylvania Youth Congress believes that the fight for dignity under the law for LGBTQ people is a nonpartisan movement. Just as PYC draws light to both Republicans and Democrats for supporting LGBTQ inclusion, we must call out when either Republicans or Democrats use LGBTQ people for political games. **When both sides dig their heels in on LGBTQ issues to demonstrate their strength in the hope to drive up votes for their perceived bases, it's LGBTQ people who end up getting hurt.**

The Pennsylvania Youth Congress is in awe of the bravery, determination, and strength of LGBTQ people and their allies in Chambersburg. For many months they fought tirelessly for the ordinance's adoption, and are now at the crossroads watching them be viciously attacked by their local government.

This is not the end. **The community of Chambersburg is resilient and persistent in their care for one another.** One day soon, this grievous decision will be rectified and everyone will be treated equally under the law in Chambersburg.

We know the moral arc of the universe will continue to bend toward justice. The opposition to LGBTQ inclusive ordinances would not have formed if we were not being successful in achieving major progress in rural and small town Pennsylvania.

The Pennsylvania Youth Congress will continue pressing for nonpartisan education and outreach supporting the dignity of LGBTQ people in Chambersburg and in all our small towns of Pennsylvania.

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The Pennsylvania Youth Congress advances freedom and justice for young LGBT Pennsylvanians through advocating for responsible public policy. As a youth-led organization, PYC represents citizens working toward safer schools and thriving communities across the commonwealth.

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