

Senator Bob Casey Jr. visits Chambersburg

Community leaders praised for response to January repeal of LGBTQ+ protections

By Andy Abel

Senator Bob Casey Jr. met with business leaders, community advocates and Wes Fugate, President of Wilson College, at Gear House Friday morning, June 17, to discuss LGBTQ+ issues and the community's response to the new Chambersburg Borough Council.

Last January, the newly elected majority Republican Council voted to reject an existing ordinance extending protection against discrimination based on sexual orientation. The ordinance had been enacted just four months previously by what was then a Democratic majority.

Chambersburg was the first municipality in the state to repeal protections for LGBTQ+ citizens.

In the aftermath, business and community organizations concerned about possible negative branding of the community as hateful toward the LGBTQ+ community responded with events and messages of welcome and openness.

"I was especially moved and inspired," said Casey, "by what this community did in light of the repeal of the ordinance, and what business owners were willing to do to use their voice and their own platform to stand up for the LGBTQ+ community, not only at a time like this, during Pride Month, but more generally to push back against that discrimination."

Noel Purdy, President of the Franklin County Coalition for

Progress, praised grassroots efforts after the ordinance was rescinded to make LGBTQ+ citizens feel welcome and accepted, such as Chambersburg's Welcoming Project, Taste of Pride, Caring Picnic, and Pride Festival.

"I think it symbolizes that just because there are certain people in power, it doesn't represent the majority of people... We're just living in a point in time where things are upside down."

"The federal part of this," said Casey, "...is the Equality Act, which we haven't passed. We've got great support on one side, of course, but not nearly enough on the other" said Casey, who added that "We need to keep making the case for how important the Equality Act is."

The Equality Act would amend the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to "prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex, gender identity, and sexual orientation, and for other purposes." The bill "prohibits an individual from being denied access to a shared facility, including a restroom, a locker room, and a dressing room, that is in accordance with the individual's gender identity."

The bill passed the House of Representatives with support from only three Republicans. It is expected to face difficulty passing the Senate.

Van Gray, the Owner of Gear House Brewing, said that usually his business avoids political issues, but that in this case he found it impossible to stay neutral:

"When we started this business five years ago, we envisioned it as a place everyone could come from the community... that was our concept." He felt Council's decision



Sen. Bob Casey Jr. met with community leaders in Chambersburg at Gear House Brewing

Photo by Andy Abel

"crossed a red line" and forced him to speak out.

Kendra Matusiak, who runs an interior design business, said that her work comes down to creating spaces where people "feel emotionally welcomed" and said she feels an obligation to speak up for people who may not feel comfortable speaking up. Matusiak said her being in an interracial relationship increased her awareness of LGBTQ+ concerns. She said she deals with stares, unwanted comments and people "who don't accept who I love."

Amer Chaudhry, the Owner of Falafel Shack, wants people to feel welcomed at his restaurant. "That's why it was important for me to speak. I want everyone to feel equal, accepted and welcome."

Listening to the comments, Casey remarked on the important role played by business leaders:

"Sometimes all the speeches by public officials don't add up to one business leader standing up and making a case," he said.

"It was really powerful for

those of us who are in the LGBTQ+ community to see the outpouring of support," said Fugate, who is somewhat unusual in being both Republican and openly gay.

He spoke of the efforts to bring rainbow symbols to the Ice Fest and the strong feelings at the event. "When I was introduced, it was like a rock concert or something," he said. He also spoke of his positive experience coming to Wilson College, where he was warmly welcomed.

Participants in the event spoke of how the Council decision has threatened businesses and other institutions:

Gray said "This is a business issue; this is a huge business issue!" but added that reasserting a welcoming image has had a dramatic impact. "We've seen it flip, since we've come out so pro in favor of this; now we've got people coming from two hours away. Every weekend we have people who say 'Hey, I saw your message on Facebook' and we traveled two hours just to stop by."

Matusiak related that coverage

of the decision has meant she needs to reassure potential customers that Franklin County is safe. She said Council's decision had threatened a variety of businesses, such as AirB&B rentals.

Fugate explained that national and international coverage of the decision has complicated his efforts to recruit talent to the college. He now brings candidates to restaurants that put up welcoming stickers, and when he meets with business leaders he stresses that "it is important for us to be able to recruit the workforce that we need." Franklin County currently has a severe worker shortage.

Casey again praised the community response and said "It's especially significant because it's not just something that's playing out in Washington only... or with major corporations taking action. That's always helpful, obviously, but when you have a community and a borough come together at such a local level, and in a county where people may not expect it, it's just a much bigger, more significant message."