



Moderator Suzie Smalley lays out the ground rules for the LGBTQ Town Hall at the Soldotna Public Library in Soldotna, Alaska on Jan. 4, 2020. (Photo by Brian Mazurek/Peninsula Clarion)

Packed town hall addresses LGBTQ safety

Town hall ends with call to action for local lawmakers

By Brian Mazurek

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At a town hall on Saturday, peninsula residents, law enforcement officials and elected representatives spoke at length about the issue of public safety for the LGBTQ community.

The event, which was organized in the wake of an [assault on a local LGBTQ activist](#), drew over 100 people to the conference room of the Soldotna Public Library to reflect on the recent assault as well as to hear stories from others who had experienced harassment or violence.

In addition to members of the LGBTQ community and their allies, those in attendance included Kenai and Soldotna City Council members, Soldotna Mayor Pete Sprague, members of the Soldotna Police Department, Kenai Peninsula Borough Assembly members, State Sen. Peter Micciche, R-Soldotna, and State Rep. Gary Knopp, R-Soldotna.

The town hall was moderated by Suzie Smalley, who began the event by laying out general ground rules to ensure everyone who spoke was heard and treated with respect.

Smalley turned the mic over to Tammie Willis, who was the victim of the assault that occurred on Dec. 9, to give an update on her life and the ongoing investigation by Alaska State Troopers. Willis said she was overwhelmed by the turnout of Saturday's Town Hall.

"My wounds have healed on the outside, and they're starting to heal on the inside," Willis said. "We still have a lot of healing to do, but when I look around and I see that my community consists of so much more support than I ever thought it did, it really means a lot. I feel safer and more secure knowing that there are people out there advocating for the LGBT community."

Willis said that, since her assault, the FBI has been in contact with her about the possibility of the incident rising to the level of a federal hate crime.

Smalley opened the floor to hear testimonies from LGBTQ individuals to share, whether it was the challenges they face or the things they appreciate about the peninsula.

Some simply voiced their interest in seeing more LGBTQ-friendly places within the community. Others shared stories on behalf of others who were apprehensive about coming to the town hall and speaking publicly about their experiences.

One such example was Kaegan Koski, a high school student who told the story of his classmates being targeted with repeated homophobic slurs through anonymous Instagram accounts.

While reading the messages sent out loud, Koski censored himself and repeatedly pointed into the air each time a slur or profanity was used. Koski's right hand pointed upwards for most of his recounting, and his left hand shakily held his notes as he struggled to repeat what had been said to his classmates.

"Coupled with the depression so often found among students placed in these horrifying situations, both students told me how compelled they were to self-harm, and how their friends felt the same," Koski said. "And when these students found out the identity of some of the people making these terrible accounts, they went to school teachers and principals pleading for help but the teachers waved it off, saying they couldn't do anything due to it being off school property. That was the end of the conversation. No calls to parents, no attempt to console the student victims."

Koski himself had also recently been the target of harassment when he and his friend were followed by a group of people in a car that shouted slurs at them while the two were riding their bikes.

"On Dec. 9, a horrifying event occurred, and the self-assuring words of sympathy I've heard from our Soldotna community is, 'What a horrible thing to do, I can't believe someone would do that here,'" Koski said. "I can. The 11 students who were involved in my stories can. The many students who are too afraid to say anything at all anymore can."

After hearing from those who had experienced harassment firsthand, those who considered themselves allies to the LGBTQ community spoke about what they feel their responsibility is to ensure the safety of others, as well as how they have sometimes failed in their allyship. Many of those who spoke were parents who shared what it was like to have a child in the LGBTQ community. One man admitted to his use of hateful and homophobic language in the past, and another woman shared an experience where someone around her had been using derogatory language and she didn't speak up.

Many of those who spoke at the town hall said that they did not come with the intention of speaking, but felt compelled to do so after hearing from others.

At one point, Smalley asked the audience who considered themselves an ally to the LGBTQ community. Most people in the room raised their hands. Smalley later asked how many people felt like they had failed as an ally at some point in their lives, to which many of the same people raised their hands.

Willis responded by thanking everyone for their honesty and said that no one can be perfect, even those within the LGBTQ community.

“There is no such thing as being a perfect ally,” Willis said. “The point is that you have a sense of self-awareness and self-reflection, and you’re willing to listen and learn from the community. That’s your greatest strength.”

After those who wished to share had spoken, Leslie Byrd, residence life coordinator at Kenai Peninsula College, encouraged everyone in attendance to participate in the upcoming [Safe Zone](#) training on Feb. 8 at the KPC Residence Hall. Safe Zone is a program that educates businesses, organizations and the general public on how to provide a space where LGBTQ individuals feel safe and welcome. Byrd also provides Safe Zone training for free on request, and anyone interested can email Byrd at lmbyrd2@alaska.edu for more information.

The final phase of the evening consisted of a call to action to local elected officials. Knopp said at the end of the town hall that he is planning to introduce legislation during the upcoming legislative session in Juneau that would amend Alaska’s existing hate crime [statute](#) to include gender identity and sexual orientation as protected classes.

Council members from the cities of Kenai and Soldotna including Bob Malloy, Jordan Chilson, Paul Whitney and Pamela Parker as well as Borough Assembly member Hal Smalley said that they would work to pass resolutions on the city and borough level in support of Knopp’s upcoming legislation. Audre Gifford, another organizer for the event, also asked Micciche to support [SB82](#), which is legislation that would prohibit discrimination on the state level on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity. Micciche said that he is considering the legislation but would not promise to support it.

The final call to action was to ask the cities of Kenai and Soldotna as well as the Borough to pass a resolution recognizing June as LGBTQ Pride month. A livestream of the town hall is available on the [Soldotna Pride in the Park Facebook Page](#).



Rep. Gary Knopp, R-Soldotna, speaks at the LGBTQ Town Hall at the Soldotna Public Library in Soldotna, Alaska on Jan. 4, 2020. (Photo by Brian Mazurek/Peninsula Clarion)



Sen. Peter Micciche, R-Soldotna, speaks at the LGBTQ Town Hall at the Soldotna Public Library in Soldotna, Alaska on Jan. 4, 2020. (Photo by Brian Mazurek/Peninsula Clarion)



Sgt. Tobin Brennan with the Soldotna Police Department speaks at the LGBTQ Town Hall at the Soldotna Public Library in Soldotna, Alaska on Jan. 4, 2020. (Photo by Brian Mazurek/Peninsula Clarion)



Audre Gifford asks Sen. Peter Micciche, R-Soldotna, to support SB82 during the LGBTQ Town Hall at the Soldotna Public Library in Soldotna, Alaska on Jan. 4, 2020. (Photo by Brian Mazurek/Peninsula Clarion)



Tammie Willis speaks at the LGBTQ Town Hall at the Soldotna Public Library in Soldotna, Alaska on Jan. 4, 2020. (Photo by Brian Mazurek/Peninsula Clarion)

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