

LCC trustees, gay group differ on Council candidates' records

September 25, 2002 Publication: Lansing City Pulse (MI) Word Count: 1585

LCC trustees, gay group differ on Council candidates' records

By DANIEL STURM

Stepping into the Lansing City Council contest, three Lansing Community College board members have sent a letter to Lansing's gay community commending Brian Jeffries for his record on gay rights. But leaders of Lansing's gay rights organization dispute their position, saying Jeffries' opponent, Kathy Pelleran, is the true friend of the gay community.

Pelleran and Jeffries, who are seeking an at-large Council seat in the Nov. 5 general election, are both LCC trustees.

In an open letter to the gay community sent via e-mail to members of the Lansing Association for Human Rights, trustees Todd A. Heywood, Olga Holden and Thomas Rasmusson said Jeffries is "a true friend □ of the LBGT (lesbian, bi, gay and transgender) community." In comparison, Pelleran was described as "weak on the issue of protecting LBGT people on the campus of LCC and we believe she will continue this weak leadership to the City Council if elected."

That differs from the position of the association's political action committee, which unanimously rated Pelleran "Positive," whereas Jeffries received a grade of "Somewhat Positive." Moreover, LAHR-PAC has given Jeffries worst evaluations in the past. According to LAHR-PAC's president, Joseph Marutiak, Jeffries "is on public record as unsupportive of the LBGT community" during his 1986 to 1992 term as Ingham County commissioner.

In a letter that was e-mailed to LAHR's listserv, the three college trustees stated they were shocked to read

an evaluation in which Kathy Pelleran, "with no visible history on LBGT issues, was rated above Mr. Jeffries. We think these ratings are backwards." The ratings, based on answers to a questionnaire as well as candidates' records on issues, were announced before the August primary election.

Marutiak pointed out that after the primary, LAHR-PAC reviewed the two candidates' records and unanimously concluded that the ratings should remain the same. LAHR-PAC argues that in Jeffries' previous campaigns for public office, including county commissioner, district court judge and LCC trustee, he had refused to publicly state support for LBGT issues "and in fact never returned a survey prior to this most recent one." Only because Jeffries stated support for some LBGT issues in June 2002 did the Lansing Association for Human Rights increase his rating from "negative" to "somewhat positive."

LAHR-PAC was particularly critical of Jeffries' performance as a county commissioner. In its official response to the trustees' letter, LAHR-PAC said: "There was a much publicized arrest of 42 men at a local rest area. The names and occupations of the arrested individuals were paraded in front of the media and led to the personal and professional devastation of several of the individuals. Jeffries cast a vote opposing a resolution that asked law enforcement official and the media to reconsider the destructive impact, which they have by publishing the names of those who had been arrested but not convicted."

The three trustees drew a different picture of Jeffries, who chairs the LCC board. Their open letter states that he had been "a very vocal ally and supporter of the inclusion of gender identity and expression in LCC's non-discrimination policies." If LCC became the first community college in Michigan to offer domestic partnerships, it will be because of Brian Jeffries' leadership on the issue, they argued.

"On the other hand," they wrote, "Ms. Pelleran has shown she is weak on the issue of protecting LBGT people on the campus of LCC and we believe she will continue this weak leadership to the City Council if elected. Early on she expressed opposition to domestic partners, although we are proud to say that she now says she is supportive of them. And the legal opinion allowing the administration at LCC to enforce gender discrimination in place of gender identity and expression is, in part, the direct result of Ms. Pelleran refusing in March to support inclusion of gender identity and expression in our non-discrimination policies.

"Her opposition was made clear during a Board Dinner and Work Session when the issue, under the leadership of Brian Jeffries, was brought forward as friendly amendment to the policies. Her opposition was, and this is a quote, "The administration has not received any complaints on this issue, so why should we deal with it?" When Ms. Pelleran was informed by Trustee Heywood that several board members had received complaints and concerns, Ms. Pelleran once again re-iterated her opposition based on the fact that the administration had not received any complaints.

In an interview, Pelleran declined to comment on the accusation. She said there was no reason to consider either of the questions the trustees raised because she had always supported same-sex partner benefits. "I am the only board of trustee member who has worked for universal healthcare coverage. I support the civil rights ordinance and same-sex partner benefits, because it's to the benefit of the taxpayer that we take care of our workers and families in our community." The ordinance to which she referred included gay rights. City Council approved it in 1995, but voters reversed the decision in the general election.

In its letter to the trustees, LAHR-PAC stated that Pelleran had never voted against gay rights issues. "She has consistently taken a strong public and private stance in writing in favor of equal rights for LBGT people."

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Lansing City Pulse (MI)

Date: September 25, 2002

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