

To say no to discrimination, say ‘yes’ to TC ballot issue

On Nov. 8 Traverse City voters will have the opportunity — maybe once and for all — to say it loud and clear: We don’t discriminate against our friends and neighbors because of their gender, their race, their religion or their sexual orientation.

It’s a chance for residents to once again have their say on an issue that has dogged the city for a decade — do city residents want to extend basic civil rights protections to all their neighbors or give in to a small but vocal group that, in the end, promotes the right to discriminate?

It’s a simple choice that has been clouded by all kinds of rhetoric — some of it downright goofy. The main pro-discrimination theme has been that protecting a group of people from discrimination in employment and housing is somehow giving them “special rights” — as if their place as targets of discrimination is part of the natural order and should not be tampered with. How bizarre. In at least one instance the pro-discrimination rhetoric has been downright comedic. A recent claim by the pro-discrimination forces was that the ordinance would allow men who dress as women to go into women’s public restrooms. It does no such thing, of course — and in fact that’s not illegal now.

Most recently, the pro-discrimination group has said it is defending business owners who might find it impossible under the ordinance to fire someone if he or she is gay. That’s just not so, but it’s a staple of the pro-fear, prodiscrimination campaign.

In reality, bad employees who happen to be gay can be fired just as easily as anyone else, but not if their only fault is being gay or, for that matter, if their only fault is being black or female or a Mormon or a Roman Catholic.

That image — the poor, helpless business owner being held hostage by militant gay folks — portrays business owners as being so befuddled they can’t decide for themselves who is a good employee and who isn’t.

Assertions that employers are helpless against someone who files a discrimination claim because retaliation is prohibited purposely omit a central fact — any employee, gay or not, can be fired for cause, just not

if their only offense is to be gay.

It's simple stuff. Do we want to protect people from discrimination in employment or housing strictly because of their sexual orientation? Yes or no? The ordinance makes a slew of allowances for individuals to follow their own religious beliefs. Individuals who rent out rooms in their home are exempt, as are religious groups or churches in terms of hiring someone. The ordinance does prohibit landlords and housing facilities from turning away renters based on their sexuality alone.

For many city residents, this is *deja vu*. After an incident outside a gay bar in 2000, the city circulated "We Are Traverse City" stickers to try to defuse tensions. An ordinance similar to the current non-discrimination ordinance was proposed, but the city commission didn't have the courage to see it through.

Later, many of the current pro-discrimination people put an issue on the ballot that would prohibit the city from adopting any rule to protect homosexuals and bisexuals from discrimination. Voters thumped it by a 58-42 percent margin. This time, let's go for 70 percent.

There was some confusion earlier this year about the actual ballot wording; the city commission later approved a clarified version, which appears below:

Shall Chapter 605 of the Traverse City Code of Ordinances, entitled Non-Discrimination, which does the following, with certain exceptions:

1. Prohibits specified discriminatory practices in housing, public accommodation, and employment,
 2. Prohibits discriminatory policies and advertisements,
 3. Prohibits retaliation against a person for making a complaint or assisting in an investigation under the Chapter,
 4. Prohibits conspiring to discriminate,
 5. Requires non-discrimination by city contractors, and
 6. Sets forth remedies and penalties for violations of the Chapter,
- remain in effect? Yes / No What counts most are the first three words and the last three: "Shall Chapter 605 ... remain in effect"

The bottom line: If you support the non-discrimination ordinance, which prevents discrimination based on sexual orientation, vote "yes."