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Voters have a chance to say 'no' to bigotry 1

Traverse City voters should welcome the opportunity to weigh in on a matter of public import when the Nov. 8 general election rolls around. City residents can decisively reject a ballot measure forced upon them by a fractional, yet fractious segment of the community.

At issue is the city's fledgling antidiscrimination ordinance, a law Traverse City commissioners unanimously supported in October 2010, one which bans employers from discriminating against or firing employees because of their sexual orientation. It also prohibits landlords and housing facilities from turning away renters based on their sexuality alone.

The city's Human Rights Commission drafted the law to protect citizens who potentially fell between the cracks of existing civil rights laws. Federal and state rules provide protection based on religion, race and host of other criteria, but sexuality is omitted.

City officials rightly backed shored-up protection efforts because it was fair and reasonable, and because commissioners view Traverse City as a community that's willing to embrace people of all walks, despite its limited racial diversity.

Not everyone in town flies the open-arms flag. Several people who vehemently oppose the antidiscrimination measure spent the nine months since the law's adoption birthing an effort to overturn it.

They gathered more than 600 signatures — at least 482 valid signatures are needed to secure a ballot spot — in a campaign one of their leaders termed "fighting the agenda" ostensibly waged by gayrights activists.

City resident Paul Nepote helps lead the anti-antidiscrimination charge. He's a usual suspect in such matters and argued against Traverse City Area Public Schools' recent adoption of an anti-bullying statute (surprise, Nepote sniffed out a radical gay conspiracy to brainwash children).

He's also fired off some bizarre, downright nasty antigay missives to gay city Commissioner Jim Carruthers, who's often too quick to take Nepote's hate-bait.

Nepote calls the city's antidiscrimination rules "unnecessary." White people said the same thing in the Jim Crow south when blacks began their painful, no-turningback push for civil rights.

In a way, Nepote and his followers indeed are fighting an agenda; more to the point, they're fighting for their own agenda, one that's borne of bigotry and meant to foster exclusion and division. But the sense here is that there isn't much blood left in that turnip. Traverse City has its flaws, but generally it's moved beyond such archaic thinking and understands well the benefits of inclusion.

Voters can reject Nepote and crew and finally, firmly put to rest an issue that's ached like a bad tooth for far too long.

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