

Charles Paullin General News Writing W12

Strasburg council to work on diversity resolution following vandalism of resident's home

By Charless Paullin

The Northern Virginia Daily

STRASBURG — The Strasburg Town Council vowed on Tuesday to work on a resolution denouncing hate after a home displaying the LGBTQIA flag was vandalized.

Paul Rush, who identified himself as a lifelong transgender citizen of the town, presented the idea of a resolution while reporting his house was vandalized on Sept. 26.

"My house was vandalized because for the first time in 27 years I felt safe publicly identifying as queer," Rush said. "My house was vandalized three days later with anti-trans, anti-gay and quite frankly anti-black messages."

Photos Rush posted to the "What's Happening Strasburg?" Facebook group show spray painted messages on his house reading "ABOMINATION WARNING" and that "BLM" means "BLACK LIVES MURDER."

Rush said Tuesday he was "genuinely" surprised by the community's good response to the vandalism. With his pictures on Facebook, he said many people have helped.

"That being said, I want to make sure this never happens to anyone again," he said.

The proposed resolution calls for the town to commit to ending the spread of hate, bigotry and harassment and for elected leaders to pledge to set positive examples for their constituents, Rush explained.

In explaining the resolution, Rush reported that the FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting program for 2020 showed that hate crimes motivated by gender-identity bias increased by nearly 20% for the second year in a row. As of Sept. 1, this year has already seen at least 37 transgender or gender nonconforming people fatally shot or killed by other violent means, Rush said.

Mayor Brandy Boies said the council would put the proposal into its own words and potentially adopt it during a November meeting. After learning of the incident on social media, she said it "shook me to my core."

Boies added that she loved seeing the support Rush received, saying that "once again, the positive outweighs the negative."

Laura Cascada, of the social justice coalition Northern Shenandoah Valley Unites, said during the meeting that the resolution would denounce bias-motivated violent actions in the community.

"If you chose to adopt a resolution like this, you'll really be setting a model and example for other communities, like mine in Front Royal," Cascada said, adding that Stephens City passed a "pro-diversity" resolution this week.

After councilman John Massoud asked for clarification on the right terms to use, Rush explained that the letter I in the LGBTQIA acronym stands for intersex, who are people born with both male and female genitalia characteristics, and the letter A is for asexual.

Strasburg Police Chief Wayne Sager said officers canvassed the area, going door-to-door "with boots on the ground," but the situation is an ongoing investigation with minimal leads. Sager noted the popularity of home-surveillance cameras and said his officers have asked residents in the area with them for help in identifying leads, but haven't received any.

Strasburg resident's home vandalized for second time; police investigate incidents as hate crimes

**By Charles Paullin
The Northern Virginia Daily**

For the second time in two months, the home of a transgender Strasburg resident has been vandalized with spray-painted graffiti.

Paul Rush, 27, of Branch Street, said that derogatory words and an obscene hand gesture were painted on their house Tuesday night.

This comes after a Sept. 26 incident in which anti-LGBTQIA and anti-Black messages were spray painted on Rush's home. On Sept. 23, Rush had displayed a pride flag to openly express being a non-binary transgender person, which means not identifying as a male or female.

"Most of the time people, especially around here, tend to just disagree quietly, even if they put the occasional snarky Facebook post," said Rush, who uses the pronouns they and their. "But that's usually as far as it goes."

Rush said they waited until 2017 to come out as transgender to close friends because of the fear of what might happen.

"This is the first time I've ever seen something like this," said Rush, a lifelong Strasburg resident.

Rush said they were a little worried on Tuesday because there's generally an uptick of hateful actions against minority groups following a close election, regardless of who wins. Rush added that they stayed up "a little bit late" watching election results and if the vandals "came while we were awake, we certainly didn't hear anything."

Although Rush said they do not have any proof, they have a gut feeling of the culprit's identity.

“Strasburg is a very small community. There’s not a lot of openly LGBT people here,” Rush said. “I believe it’s just the bigotry of just one person or maybe just a small group of people who live on this street or in this neighborhood.”

Rush and their wife, who live with two cats, looked into purchasing a security camera after the first incident. They held off, however, because money was tight, Rush said.

AIDS Response Effort, based in Winchester, and a neighbor have offered to provide cameras, said Rush, who works for a local nonprofit. Pressure washing company SemperFi LLC and neighbors have helped clean up the damage and provide meals, Rush said.

Strasburg Police Chief Wayne Sager said his department is “absolutely” looking into these incidents as hate crimes and is actively working to gather evidence to find the offender and successfully prosecute them.

“This is devastating to all of us,” Sager said. “It is not to be tolerated, and we’re going to do our best to bring justice to Mr. Rush and his family and friends as well, the victims of this.”

Although officers have contacted 81 residents and businesses in the area, Sager said the department has not identified a person of interest.

Sager asked anyone with information to come forward. The department can be reached at 540-465-5230.

“With the vulgar language and the hate things that are being targeted there to Mr. Rush’s residence, we want to make sure we do our jobs,” Sager said.

The Strasburg Town Council is drafting a resolution presented last month by Rush and members of the Northern Shenandoah Unites social justice coalition. The council will vote whether to adopt the resolution at its Tuesday meeting.

Mayor Brandy Boies and Councilman John Massoud visited Rush’s house Wednesday following the incident, Rush said.

Boies said during a Wednesday phone interview that the council is working on the resolution and will continue working to remain an open elected body that can be approached with any concerns.

“It’s heartbreaking that it happened again,” said Boies, adding it’s not indicative of the community, which has recently held events bringing people together. “It’s not who we are.”

Rush noted that Strasburg has undergone a “tremendous change” in becoming a more open and accepting place.

Rush also noted they have heard from young people identifying as LGBT and talking about their situations has helped.

“I certainly would rather not deal with it,” Rush said. “But I do think there is a benefit. It does get people talking.”

Nov. 20 marks a “day of remembrance” for transgender people, particularly transgender people of color, who are disproportionately victims of murder and hate crimes, Rush added.

“I would really love if the town could partake in that,” Rush said. “Especially in light of two hate crimes against the same non-binary individual in a short time frame.”

Strasburg Town Council delays action on unity resolution following hate crimes

By Charles Paullin

The Northern Virginia Daily

STRASBURG — Although the Strasburg Town Council took no action Tuesday on a unity resolution that expresses tolerance for all residents, officials heard from several speakers who attended the meeting to support a resident whose home has been vandalized twice in the past two months.

The resolution was proposed last month after the home of Paul Rush, a non-binary transgender resident, was vandalized in September. Rush’s home was vandalized with graffiti again last week.

Mayor Brandy Boies said during the meeting that the council was still working on the resolution and wanted to wait to vote until every member was present. Councilwoman Emily Reynolds was absent from the meeting.

“We want more time to work on our resolution and our plan for moving forward, but also we feel that it is important for every single council member to be part of that decision,” Boies said. “We will wait until all of us can be sitting up here, and continue to receive feedback from citizens as we go forward.”

Two people walked out of the meeting after Boies announced the resolution was taken off the agenda.

Rush, who was one of seven speakers at the meeting, said they had a “very strong” reaction to a draft of the resolution and thanked Councilwoman Christie Monahan for writing it.

“My wife and I, and the community, are fighting very harshly just to survive. And I would implore all of you to please support this,” Rush said. “I know some of the wording may seem a bit strong, but at the end of the day I’m not asking you to start a socialist revolution. We’re not asking for anything other than you saying, ‘We love and embrace and protect the human rights of every single person in this community, regardless of if we agree, disagree with them, their life choices, we’re here for them...’”

Rush was one of just over two dozen attendees who filled the room, compared to the regular few who typically attend the meetings.

Sheila Rice, who lives on East King Street, said she understood the resolution's sentiment. She will be raising a pride flag outside her home and urged residents and businesses to take similar actions, which she said would send a message of safety while condemning bullying and hate.

"I am outraged for you," Rice said to Rush.

Rice added she has felt uncomfortable while walking around her neighborhood, where a town home displays Ku Klux Klan and Nazi symbols.

"Why are they allowed to display hate speech that includes anti-Black, antisemitic, anti-LGBTQ symbols that are clearly visible from the street?" Rice said. "I want to feel safe in our quaint little community. I want others to feel safe and for support especially to be shown to the LGBTQIA+ community as well as for people of color — super underrepresented in this room."

Former Councilwoman Kim Bishop spoke of a history of town incidents, including the destruction of her political signs during the Obama-McCain election; a boy being sexually molested on a school bus; constant bullying in schools; a woman, two other people and Hispanics being harassed in town; and hate speech during the last president's term.

"I could go on about the harassment in town, but I'll stop now, only to say that many people are and have been treated badly here," Bishop said.

Bishop said there are way more "honorable, caring, loving and wonderful people, far more than the haters."

Saying that she hoped Strasburg didn't become a political epicenter for the county, Bishop said the town should not pass a divisive unity resolution. Instead, she suggested a resolution about "bleeding purple" — the high school's color — as this would be inclusive and positive.

Laura Cascada, a representative of the Northern Shenandoah Valley Unites social justice group that has been helping Rush, said it was important to take urgent action as hate crimes can escalate. Last year was the deadliest year on record for transgender individual and there have been about 45 deaths so far this year, including murders and suicides, Cascada said. Black and brown people are most vulnerable to these type of hate crimes, Cascada said.

Mount Zion United Methodist Church Pastor Todd Gess said he prays for his congregation, which is comprised of several African Americans who live in a community where vandalism has occurred. He added that he previously kept quiet about appalling events.

"But in my silence, and setting back and not saying anything, is really a voice of acceptance," Gess said. "And I'm here to today to say as a pastor in this community it's not acceptable. We need to do better, our nation needs to better. And it begins with each and every individual here. Not with the other person, but with yourself."

Erik Jurek, a gay man, said the south isn't what it is stereotyped to be, with most of his "gay bashings" occurring in Washington, D.C. In the Shenandoah Valley, there's a constructive way to deal with things, including disagreements, he said.

"Down here is where the love is," Jurek said.

Strasburg Town Council rejects unity resolution

By Charles Paullin

The Northern Virginia Daily

STRASBURG — The Strasburg Town Council voted down a resolution of unity during its regular meeting Tuesday night following an emotional discussion nearly two months after the resolution was initially proposed.

The vote was 5-3, with Vice Mayor Ken Cherrix and council members Doreen Ricard, John Massoud, Taralyn Nicholson and Christie Monahan voting against the resolution. Council members Paul Weaver, Dane Hooser and Emily Reynolds voted in favor of it.

Mayor Brandy Boies only votes in a tie-breaking situation.

The resolution was proposed in October by non-binary transgender resident Paul Rush, 27, of Branch Street, after their house was vandalized with homophobic and racist graffiti on Sept. 26. The following month, Rush's house was vandalized again with more graffiti.

Strasburg Police Chief Wayne Sager said Wednesday investigators do not have any leads or a person of interest in the case.

The resolution was proposed by Rush as a way for the town to indicate it supports all people while denouncing hate and bigotry.

Ricard was first to speak on Tuesday in opposition of the resolution, saying it focused too heavily on Rush's incidents when there have been other events.

"It's not anything against any group, I just think it should be totally inclusive," Ricard said. "And if we say we're starting this and starting this because of this one event, it kind of makes it about that one event."

Mayor Brandy Boies said the dates of Rush's incidents, which included statements of "blatant racism," were included in the resolution to provide context on the catalyst for the resolution.

"It's not easy. It's very brave and takes a lot of courage to walk into that room, and the amount of hurt that was felt by not only the individuals who live in that home and the community of allies," Boies said by phone interview Wednesday. "I personally felt disrespectful to flat out not even mention how we got there — why we were there."

Cherrix echoed Ricard's concerns during the meeting and said that vandalism is a criminal matter.

“Human nature is something that is taught and learned, you can not change it by a piece of paper,” Cherrix said. “Us saying saying everybody be friends, hold hands, kumbaya, that’s all fine and dandy, but you can’t enforce that on everybody ... being inclusive more of one particular group than every group that we have in this town, will [divide] this town even more.”

Boies responded to Cherrix by stating that council members sit in powerful seats and the resolution supported “all” groups, she said.

“This says all, a-l-l, capital A, capital L, capital L, all,” Boies said. “It does not get any clearer than that.”

Both Monahan, who read a statement saying citizens should be respectful and accepting, and Nicholson, who thanked Rush and everyone for what they have done, stated they voted against it because they wanted to spend more time working on the resolution to get it right.

Massoud said he agreed with Ricard and proposed removing the dates of Rush’s incident and then voting on the resolution, but the council took no further action.

The proposed resolution didn’t take away from the past events and it showed that the leaders of Strasburg stand with Rush and their community, Hooser said. Reynolds apologized to Rush for the vandalism. Weaver proposed the adoption of the resolution after stating he appreciated the specific historic context.

Rush said during the meeting he was thankful for the work put into the resolution. Rush and about 10 others walked out of the meeting after the vote.

“It’s sad that it got rejected, however it’s not surprising,” Rush said after the meeting. “The moment that a governmental body does not step up in a moment of injustice, they side with the perpetrator. They may not see it that way, but...we were all awake and speak English.”

Rush said they initially agreed with Ricard’s proposal to remove the specific dates, but after hearing Boies’ explanation for including such context in the resolution, Rush believed the dates should remain.

Gary Auerbach, 55, of Winchester, who attended the meeting in support of Rush, shouted “shame,” and stated three months should be enough time to work on the resolution. “I think the opportunity is there to set a standard to be a bright star in Virginia right now, in this country, and they messed that up. They chose not to,” Auerbach said after the meeting.

A vacancy on the council is opening following the resignation of Weaver, who is retiring and moving out of the town. Rush is among the five people being interviewed by the council to fill the position, Rush said, and if they are appointed there could be another resolution coming forward to the council.

Monahan said by phone interview Wednesday she will be working to bring the item up at a work session so crafting it can be discussed publicly, which was what some council members wanted. She will also advocate for the “We Bleed Purple” resolution she drafted. The

resolution, which refers to the high school's colors, makes no reference specifically to the incidents involving the Rushes.

Massoud by phone interview Wednesday said he would support the "We Bleed Purple" resolution and discussing the resolution at an upcoming work session. Weaver declined to say if he would support the "We Bleed Purple" resolution, and, "I don't know if an open discussion has changed the way I thought about something, but there's nothing wrong with open deliberations."

"I'm sure that there are people that are in town, that are [anti-LGBTQIA], obviously. Paul [Rush] got his house spray painted," Monahan said Wednesday. "Was that influencing anyone's vote? I absolutely don't think that's the case ... the majority of the people in Strasburg are loving and caring and kind. I think it's just the wording the people have a hard time wrapping their heads around, on both sides."

If the majority of council wants to discuss the resolution at a work session it will be added to the agenda, Boies said Wednesday, but she's not sure if the council is capable of agreeing.

The "We Bleed Purple resolution," she said, was taken by some council members as not making a strong enough statement for the town.

"They just don't want to point out this specific hate crime that happened in town," Boies said as to why the council won't be able come together.

The council will next hold a work session at 7 p.m. Monday at Town Hall, 174 E. King St.