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NEWS

Pride banners vandalized in Poulsbo, and community responds



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POULSBO -- In the early morning hours June 1, the beginning of Pride month, banners recognizing the month along Front Street were vandalized, the second year in a row the city's recognition of Pride has been damaged. Soon after an individual quickly went to work to repair the damaged banners, which have been a source of contention in the community since the idea was introduced.

Sometime before 4 a.m. on Saturday, five banners hung the previous night on poles through the city's downtown district were slashed, according to Poulsbo's Police Chief Ron Harding. It's the second year that downtown decorations for Pride month, which were instituted by a Poulsbo City Council vote in 2023, were vandalized. In 2023, rainbow flags symbolizing Pride month were stolen from Front Street, and Mayor Becky Erickson received letters opposing the city's decision to recognize Pride.

Erickson acknowledged that there have been residents opposed to the city's support of Pride through the decorations, but condemned the actions from the weekend.

"We do not tolerate hateful actions. Everyone is welcome to their opinions, but... don't participate in hateful activities..." Erickson said, "Everyone is welcome here."

The city is currently investigating the vandalism, and the police have surveillance footage of the suspect, Harding said. The crime is being investigated as a felony, due to the value of the damaged banners. Harding asked the community to share any information they have

regarding the vandalism with the Poulsbo Police Department. He added that the vandalism could potentially be charged as a hate crime.

Many people were left concerned the morning of the vandalism, and a discussion on how to fix the banners began.

Heather McLain, executive director of Poulsbo Pride, said that a man visiting Poulsbo heard about the damage early Saturday and on his own set to repair the banners. When McLain met him on Front Street, she said the man had brought thread and a ladder and was sewing the damaged banners back together. She said he prefers not to be identified, but is now planning to volunteer during the upcoming Poulsbo Pride month events.

“This person took initiative and really inspired us. This is a community that stands together. We are resilient. (And) those flags stand for that,” said McLain.

In May 2023, Poulsbo's City Council approved the decision to sanction a Pride month display for the month of June, after an individual councilmember purchased Pride flags to be placed in planters along Front Street. It was the first time the city had officially sponsored any Pride recognition. A split council vote came after debate and contention among the community, including many letters to Erickson in opposition and in support, according to Kitsap Sun archives.

The city adjusted the program for 2024, opting for banners that would hang on poles where other events are recognized through the year, after the flags were stolen from planters last June and had to be replaced. The banners were designed to be more durable, Erickson said Wednesday, and \$3,500 was budgeted for the project.

Erickson said the city is willing to hear feedback from the public about the display downtown.

“They certainly can come into the city council and express their opinions if they choose,” Erickson said. “Poulsbo is... a passionate, resilient, respectful community.”

Pride events in Poulsbo that coincide with the national recognition of the month include musical bingo at the Slippery Pig Brewery Thursday night, from 7 p.m. to 11 p.m., a

Rainbow Family Picnic at Nelson Park from 11 a.m. t 2 p.m. on June 8. The annual Pride in the Park that will be held in September, with the official date and time to come from the Poulsbo Pride organization. The annual Kitsap Pride event, going on now for more than two decades, is scheduled for July 20, at the Kitsap County Fairgrounds.