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Toronto library looks at barring hate groups from renting space

The Toronto Public Library board will consider changing its policy Monday evening to prevent bookings that promote hatred or discrimination of another group or person.



JESSE WINTER / TORSTAR NEWS SERVICE

Police were called to the Richview Library in Etobicoke in August 2017 as a precaution, after a memorial service was held for a lawyer who represented far-right groups in Canada.

By: Staff Torstar News Service, Published on Mon Dec 11 2017

Police have been alerted ahead of a Toronto library board meeting tonight in which a self-proclaimed white nationalist will make a pitch to keep the space open to everyone.

At a meeting at the Toronto Reference Library, the library board will consider giving staff the right to deny groups promoting discrimination or hatred from renting library space. Slated to speak at the meeting is self-proclaimed white nationalist Paul Fromm as well as prominent members of the Jewish and Muslim communities.

Library spokesperson Ana-Maria Critchley said they have notified police of the board meeting as a “precaution, as we always do when there’s a potentially controversial situation.”

Library staff is recommending changing its policy so it can deny or cancel bookings it believes are “likely to promote, or would have the effect of promoting discrimination, contempt or hatred of any group, hatred for any person” based on race, ethnicity, colour, language, religion, age, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, among other factors, according to a report the board will consider.

“I would be shocked if this didn’t get approved,” said Councillor Paul Ainslie, who sits on the board.

The policy changes would put the library in sync with the City of Toronto’s hate legislation, he said.



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Three people, dressed in black and who would not give their names waited across the parking lot at the Richview Library in Etobicoke, where a memorial service for Barbara Kulazka, a lawyer who represented far-right groups, was held this summer. The Toronto library board is considering a proposal to bar groups that promote hatred from using library facilities.

Also slated to address the library board are Bernie Farber, former CEO of the Canadian Jewish Congress, Madi Murariu, from the Centre for Israel and Jewish Affairs, and Mohammed Hashim, of Toronto and York Region Labour Council.

“When I see everything they added (to their policy) it sends a very strong statement that the library will not be a living room for white supremacists,” Farber said, adding he considers room bookings different from hosting rallies or protests in public spaces like Nathan Phillips Square where “there’s very often a clash of racists and anti-racists and that’s the passion of free speech.

“If groups that are clearly hate-mongers ... rent a private room, there’s no balance whatsoever.”

The recommendation follows [a memorial service](#) last July for a lawyer whose clients included neo-Nazis and white nationalists, like Fromm, who organized the event, said the report. When staff found out about the third-party Richview branch booking, it immediately sought out legal advice from the City of Toronto.

In the end, the library was told it did not have legal grounds to deny the booking for the memorial service. About 20 people attended service for Barbara Kulaszka “without incident,” said the report.

The event sparked public outrage, with library staff receiving and responding to 1,600 “predominately negative” emails and voice messages, the report said. Councillors and Mayor John Tory spoke out against it.

Afterwards, the library sought legal advice, reviewed its community space rental policy, considered feedback from the public and stakeholders and examined City of Toronto policies, according to the report. The resulting proposed policy changes aim to limit hate speech.

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“Support for free speech does not translate into tolerance for hate speech,” the report said. “The public library is a welcoming, inclusive public space that supports the social justice principles of equity and inclusion and will always stand up against hate speech.”

The proposed policy changes also include making clear that violating the Criminal Code of Canada and Ontario Human Rights Code is unacceptable.

Fromm, director of the Canadian Association for Free Expression, tweeted out a link Monday morning to the presentation he said he will be giving to the library board tonight.

“The Toronto Public Library is not a private club,” Fromm wrote. “It belongs to all citizens and should be open to use, including rental of rooms for meetings, to all citizens, without discrimination, if for no other reason than all taxpayers pay for it.”

Fromm wrote that the proposed policy changes could result in banning “all sorts of meetings dealing with contentious topics” and that the recommendation is an “affront to free speech, especially as it involves subjective ‘prior restraint’ which is a violation of Canadians’ right to be innocent until proven guilty.”