

Powelton Village

Drexel rejects task force

By Timothy Cwiek
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Drexel University will not form a joint "town-gown" task force as requested by residents of Powelton Village. Powelton residents want the task force, hoping it will alleviate alleged incidents of anti-gay hate crimes in their neighborhood.

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But this week, Drexel spokesman Preston Moretz said Drexel officials will not form the task force.

He said Anthony Caneris, senior vice president for student life and administrative services at Drexel, is responsible for the decision.

Caneris could not be reached for comment.

"Basically, the feeling is that we've already got good communication channels in place with the Powelton community," Moretz said. "There's a strong, ongoing dialogue between Drexel and the community. We're happy to meet with them [Powelton residents] on any particular problem that may arise. But the university is not going to establish a task force on this. We feel that whatever is in place is sufficient."

A wave of alleged anti-gay incidents occurred in Powelton after residents began flying rainbow flags to signify their support for their gay and lesbian neighbors.

Residents allege some Drexel students are responsible for vandalizing the flags and other actions, including shouting anti-gay epithets and destroying property.

Ben Dugan, president of the Powelton Village Civic Association, was not entirely surprised by the university's refusal to form the task force, he said.

"We've heard from the local police that some universities have a pattern of not aggressively pressing charges of wrongdoing against their students," Dugan said. "They don't want the publicity — or for whatever reason."

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Martin Matsueda

RAINBOW CONNECTION: Residents of Powelton Village continue to fly rainbow flags to support their gay and lesbian neighbors. The flags have been targeted by vandals, and residents say the culprits are Drexel University students. A recent request to form a "town-gown" task force between Powelton residents and Drexel officials was rejected by the university administration.

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Dugan said he asked Drexel president Constantine Papadakis to form the task force back in January.

Papadakis did not return calls seeking comment.

Dugan said the task force could have helped Drexel promptly identify and discipline student perpetrators of anti-gay actions in the community.

Dugan also said the task force could have helped create a more accepting and culturally-diverse atmosphere at Drexel.

It would have benefited both the community and Drexel, he said.

He said several Drexel students and Powelton residents want to serve on the task force, which also would have included university officials.

Dugan said residents have compiled a list of 17 alleged incidents of anti-gay and racist incidents in Powelton within the past year. He said university officials have furnished a list of 17 actions taken in response to alleged incidents.

Ed Hermance, a Powelton resident and owner of Giovanni's Room, a Center City gay and feminist bookstore, said he was saddened that the task force will not be formed. He wanted to serve on it.

"It's very disappointing," Hermance said. "They [Drexel officials] need to listen to outside comments. I'm positive their procedures can be improved."

A greater police presence in Powelton during the past two weeks has reduced tensions, Hermance added. ▼

Editorials

No 'town-gown' group

Perhaps Drexel University officials know something Powelton Village residents do not. Perhaps these same officials have faith that the "strong, ongoing dialogue between Drexel and the community" will be sufficient to deal with the ongoing anti-gay vandalism and other incidents Powelton residents continue to experience.

Perhaps, but we — and the Powelton Village residents who have asked for a "town-gown" task force with the university — wonder.

It seems such an organization, which would specifically address situations involving Drexel, Drexel students and residents of the West Philadelphia neighborhood, would benefit all parties. Such a group could most immediately identify problems and possible solutions; after all, they are the people with the most at stake.

But Drexel officials would rather not participate; they're satisfied with the status quo.

But the fact is, the status quo is most convenient for Drexel officials, who don't have to listen to drunken students returning from weekend parties hurling anti-gay slurs and vandalizing rainbow flags. Powelton Village residents do.

The "ongoing dialogue" is controlled by Drexel, not Powelton residents. If Drexel president Constantine Papadakis doesn't want to participate, there's no effective means — say, a "town-gown" task force invitation, for example — to pressure him to do so.

This is unfortunate. A university needs its neighbors, just as a neighborhood needs entities, such as Drexel University, to keep it vibrant and inviting to others. "Town" and "gown" forces can join efforts to help each other. How many Drexel officials live in Powelton Village? How many Powelton Village residents realize the challenges of monitoring students' off-campus behavior?

Together, "town" and "gown" could learn and communicate in an ongoing manner, and respond in a united fashion to incidents affecting each other.

Instead, "gown" tells "town" to drop dead.