

Funding An Equality Community Center in Portland, Maine

Exploratory Committee Members:

Matthew Dubois, Ed Gardner, Betsy Smith, Richard Waitzkin

Background

Maine has a vibrant lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) community, including individuals and organizations that advocate for inclusiveness and equality for all. Various attempts have been made over the past few decades to create a central gathering place for members of the community and these organizations – a safe space to do our work, engage our community in a cooperative spirit and provide services, advocacy and housing, all under one roof.

Maine’s LGBTQ community needs this kind of gathering place, both in rural areas where community cohesion can be challenging and in Portland, the heart of Maine’s progressive values. An Equality Center is a place where members of the community would gather to socialize and organize, organizations would engage in greater collaboration, and affordable housing is available for those in need.

Such LGBTQ community spaces have been created across the country, usually in metropolitan areas, and using a variety of development models. Often, they expand with the assistance of city government to become an official designation – such as The South End in Boston, The Castro in San Francisco and St. Catherine Street in Montreal. While Maine’s LGBTQ community has been very successful at winning protections and advancing equality, the creation of a community center in Maine’s largest city has eluded us.



The reasons these endeavors have stalled in the past is not for lack of effort. Many thoughtful and resourceful individuals have discussed the idea extensively, and have conducted community meetings, surveys and gatherings to try and work out a plan for creating such a space. But each one has been unable to bring the idea to completion.

The reason is always the same: Funding.

Exploratory Committee for Funding

A small group of individuals familiar with Maine's LGBTQ community history and with professional experience in real estate, senior housing, business, law and fundraising began meeting in 2014 to explore how to fund a community center. Members of the Exploratory Committee include Ed Gardner, realtor and donor; Matthew Dubois, an attorney on elder issues; Betsy Smith, former ED of EqualityMaine; and Richard Waitzkin, well-known social worker. They've had discussions about funding a community center with a number of organizational heads and non-profit boards, and have begun informal discussions with potential funders and investors.

Sole purpose of committee's work

The sole purpose of an Exploratory Committee for Funding is to explore ways to fund an Equality Community Center that would 1) be a space for the LGBTQ and allied communities to meet, hold events, organize and network; 2) provide reduced rate in-town rental space for non-profit equality and supportive organizations; 3) provide affordable community housing marketed in collaboration with and central to a community center; and 4) be a community center that could, eventually, lead to an area of Portland being designated for 'our community.'

Phase I – Collaborating Organizations (our current effort)

There are a number of LGBTQ equality and service organizations that should be the grounding force of an equality community center. These organizations are often challenged with finding affordable lease space in downtown Portland. With the assistance of realtor Ed Gardner, and prior to the creation of a community center, we are working to help these organizations find affordable rental space in order to align their leases in anticipation of moving into a community center in the future.

Phase II – Funding and Building

The 'bricks and mortar' of an equality community center is in concept development. There are a number of options under consideration, including building a new structure or renovating an existing structure. There are numerous layers of consideration and complexity in identifying the most feasible option. After determining the best option, we must then put in place the legal and investment structure necessary to make the center sustainable for many years to come.

The Future – Creating the Equality Community Center

Once there is an available and funded space in Portland, only then will the community re-start discussions and visioning around supportive services, programs, collaboration and advocacy that will occur there. That will be the exciting part and we're all looking forward to it. In the meantime, please join us in laying the necessary groundwork to make an Equality Community Center a reality.