



Gay Scouts no cause for alarm among local troops

by Walter Bird Jr.

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Executives with the Boy Scouts of America (BSA) have delayed until May a decision on whether to change a longstanding policy on gays in scouting, but that is not stemming the debate. It also is not stopping area Scouts, leaders and parents from weighing in on whether homosexuals should be allowed in the more than 100-year-old organization. Local consensus is that it is time for a change.

Many of the people willing to speak about the controversial issue with Worcester Mag did not want to give their names, but most had strong opinions. We found no one in opposition of allowing gays to serve as either leaders or members of Scout troops.

“Anyone should be allowed in the troop,” says a 15-year-old First Class Scout in Troop 54, the oldest of the troops in the Mohegan Council. “We’re all people and it wouldn’t matter to me if a gay man was in my troop.”

“It’s not fair to [leave] someone out because of their sexuality,” says 15-year-old Star Scout Gavin MacNeal. “It should not matter, we’re all people and anyone should be allowed to join.”

One parent of a Scout in local Troop 9 adds: “I don’t have a problem with it as long as the person doesn’t make it known or flare their sexuality. I wouldn’t take my kid out of the program because of it.”

The debate centers on discussion at the executive level of scouting of a resolution to empower local Scout charters to decide on their own whether to allow gays to become Scouts. The longtime national BSA policy prohibits avowed homosexuals from participating in scouting. The executive board was expected to make a decision earlier this month, but as the issue exploded into controversy around the country, a vote was put off until the national meeting that will take place May 22-24 in Texas. Approximately 1,400 voting members of the BSA’s National Council are expected to determine the resolution’s fate at that time.

“For 103 years, the Boy Scouts of America has been a part of the fabric of this nation, providing its youth program of character development and values-based leadership training,” reads a statement about the executive board’s decision on the organization’s website. “In the past two weeks, Scouting has received an outpouring of feedback from the American public. It reinforces how deeply people care about Scouting and how passionate they are about the organization. After careful consideration and extensive dialogue within the Scouting family, along with comments from those outside the organization, the volunteer officers of the Boy Scouts of America’s National Executive Board concluded that due to the complexity of this issue, the organization needs time for a more deliberate review of its membership policy.”

Jeff Hotchkiss is the executive director and CEO of the Mohegan Council, which serves Central Massachusetts and boasts around 4,300 Scouts in roughly 132 chartered organizations. Mohegan is one of 10 councils in Massachusetts, although a couple of those are based in Rhode Island with just a few towns in this state, according to Hotchkiss. He says there appears to be a largely wait-and-see attitude about welcoming openly gay Scouts. To his knowledge, no parents or Scouts have pulled out of a troop over the issue yet. “No one has told me they’re leaving,” says Hotchkiss. “There are people whose beliefs put them on opposite sides [of the issue]. Some have told me they have great concern and might leave. I’ve had some emails, some people call me, a letter or two. It’s really been back and forth.”

Hotchkiss says he understands both sides, but thinks scouting could benefit from a policy change. “I would love the opportunity to go talk and sell the new policy,” he says. “I really think it gives us a chance to reach more kids with our program. I would welcome the discussion on what your personal preference is.”

Any policy that excludes people from scouting might only compound the reality of scouting in recent years: a decline in membership. Outside of an increase of members in the Mohegan Council from 2009-2010, the membership rate has mostly been flat, according to Hotchkiss. This year, however, there was a decline. “We’ve been down about 3-4 percent over the last couple years,” he says, noting there has been a decrease in members throughout New England over the past decade.

One Worcester-area Scoutmaster, asking that his name not be published, says he supports the policy change and has heard of no one who would quit should a local charter allow gay Scouts. “I’ve actually heard of more than one person not joining because they didn’t want to discriminate,” he says, adding under the proposed change local charters maintain the authority to define their own rules. “They’ll be able to continue to enforce whatever they believe in.”

The BSA does not teach sexuality, the Scoutmaster adds. “We talk about tying knots and how to set up tents,” he says.