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'Do better or step aside': Supporters rally for nonbinary Worcester councilor

Story by Adam Bass, masslive.com • 1w • 7 min read



Flags representing those who are transgender and nonbinary are unfurled in the Worcester City Council Chambers
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Supporters of Worcester City Councilor-at-Large Thu Nguyen walked into city hall Tuesday night with a clear message to the rest of the council — do better or get out of the way.


on Jan. 15 that they would be taking a month-long hiatus from the council, citing a toxic culture that has resulted in transphobia.

They said that Mayor Joseph Petty and Councilor-at-Large Kathleen Toomey misgendered them publicly on the council floor and said District 2 Councilor Candy Mero-Carlson had referred to them as “it” multiple times.

They also formally requested the city’s chief equity officer to open an immediate investigation and create an action plan to address the matter. A spokesperson for City Manager Eric D. Batista confirmed to MassLive an investigation had been launched and is being conducted by a third party.

More than 100 people packed the city council chambers, standing in solidarity with Nguyen on Tuesday. Members of the LGBTQ+ community, allies, constituents and residents criticized the city council, calling for accountability and a public apology for Nguyen. Residents said the supposed use of the word “it” is dehumanizing and created a “hostile work environment.” Flags representing the transgender and nonbinary community were unfurled on the second floor of the council chamber while supporters held signs with words of support for the councilor and the LGBTQ+ community as they went up to the podium to speak.

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 Boston 25 News

Worcester City Council addresses allegations of transphobia

“Your words have impact. Your words build worlds,” said Worcester resident Tempe Staples to the council. “Do better or step aside.”

Joshua Croke, the founder of Love Your Labels, said the council should adopt a code of conduct following these accusations.

“To see an elected body silent on this issue is shameful,” Croke said. “We have kids dying in our schools because of the lack of the inclusive leadership of this body.”

For members of the LGBTQ+ community, they said the accusations Nguyen laid out were an attack on their community.

“I feel less safe on the street, knowing that the city council does not have my back,” said Renee St. Louis, who is part of the LGBTQ+ community.

Throughout the public comment period, residents spoke in favor of an order Nguyen put forward that would call on the city manager to work with Gov. Healey and Attorney General Andrea Campbell to ensure an extension of the allowance of remote participation options, such as Zoom at public meetings.

During a previous council meeting, Nguyen, who participated remotely, said that they did not feel comfortable being on the council floor due to “this level of dehumanization of my being.”

“Speaking remotely is a benefit to city politics,” said Kirsten Frazier, who spoke remotely during the Tuesday meeting.

Before the meeting, a rally was held outside of the chambers, where District 5 Councilor Etel Haxhiaj, City Council Vice Chair and Councilor-at-Large Khrystian King and School Committee member Sue Mailman all spoke in support of Nguyen,

“When the first non-binary elected councilor in Worcester and in the Commonwealth faces transphobia locally and nationally but only three city councilors and one school committee member condemned

have no other conclusion than to say that their public declarations of support for trans, queer, LGBTQI communities have never been real,” Haxhiaj said at the rally.

The council voted unanimously on a motion that condemned the use of the slur “it” and all expressions of transphobia against Nguyen in the City of Worcester and nationally and voted 8-2 on another motion issuing an apology to Nguyen for the harm they have experienced locally and nationally. The two councilors that voted no against the second motion were Councilors-at-Large Morris Bergman and Donna Colorio.

Federal policy recognizing only two sexes

The outspoken support for Nguyen comes a day after President Donald Trump signed an [executive order](#) reading that it is the policy of the United States to recognize only two sexes — male and female.

“These sexes are not changeable and are grounded in fundamental and incontrovertible reality,” the executive order reads.

The order calls on the Secretary of State, Homeland Security secretary and the Director of the Office of Personnel Management to implement changes to government-issued identification documents, such as passports, visas and global entry cards, to reflect this policy. The order also reads that federal funds should not be used to promote gender ideology.

For Worcester resident Dani Killay, this policy is an attack on their 14-year-old transgender daughter.

Killay told MassLive that the executive orders are, in their words, scary and said they don’t want the government dictating how they can parent their child.

“I’m very concerned that my daughter is growing up in a world that

heartbreaking.

The feelings Killay felt were shared among those attending the meeting and the rally.

Croke told MassLive that the president's executive order was dehumanizing and that there are still efforts to understand the potential legal implications in Massachusetts. They said the concern is that those in their community might not have the same legal protections as others throughout the country.

"There is a severe emotional impact having the president of the country you live in minimize, reduce and dehumanize you by saying you don't exist in the government," they said.

In a statement released on Tuesday, the Massachusetts Transgender Political Coalition wrote that the executive order would lead to a "dangerous climate for transgender people in the US but they cannot erase us."

"It has been said countless times before, but a world without transgender people has never existed and never will. We repudiate anyone's claim that gender or sex can be limited to two categories or that transgender and nonbinary people are in any way a threat to anyone's safety or privacy," the statement reads.

What those Nguyen accused have said

Following Nguyen's accusations and announcement, [Petty](#), [Mero-Carlson](#) and [Toomey](#) have all released statements. In his statement, Petty wrote that once the mistake of misgendering Nguyen was brought to his attention, he quickly corrected himself and apologized. He also suggested the decision to mandate in-person attendance at Worcester City Council and sub-committee hearings was another reason for Nguyen's concerns. Nguyen participated remotely at the last city council meeting on Jan. 14.

environment.

“I will continue to work with the City Administration and [Worcester Police Department] to ensure the safety of all councilors during public meetings,” Petty said. “We are in a time of uncertainty, where members of the LGBTQIA+ community face real fears and challenges in simply being their authentic selves.”

In a statement shared by the Talk of the Commonwealth radio show [on X](#), Mero-Carlson said Nguyen “has chosen to distort the narrative and weaponize these accusations for political purposes, rather than engaging in constructive dialogue that serves the best interests of Worcester’s residents.”

Toomey also stated on X that she made an “honest error” in addressing Nguyen.

Nguyen, however, [pushed back on the statements](#) made by Petty and Mero-Carlson. They released a follow-up statement that reads the two individuals “deflect and gaslight through real accountability around the transphobia and discrimination I have experienced.”

“And so reducing my experience with transphobia and the discriminatory and toxic culture to just a discussion about remote access for public officials is an act to delegitimize my efforts for accountability and care for the humanity of the LGBTQ+ community,” Nguyen said in their statement.

Nguyen did not mention Toomey in the statement.

Several elected members and organizations from Worcester have expressed support for Nguyen and released statements condemning anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric.

“I’m saddened and frustrated that City Councillor Thu Nguyen is facing disrespect and hate in our community,” U.S. Rep. Jim McGovern, D-Worcester, posted on [X](#). “We must be dedicated to making Worcester a welcoming and safe place for all. We need to make sure that this does not happen again.”

support Nguyen.

"It's been hard to find the words to describe how disappointing, frustrating, & heartbreaking it is that such vitriol, transphobia, and hatred is being directed at Councilor Thu Nguyen & Worcester's LGBTQ+ community," he wrote. "Worcester is a community where people of all races, religions, nations of origin and identities are not just welcomed but encouraged to shape the future."

Worcester City Council Vice Chair and City Councilor-at-Large Khrystian King, District 1 Councilor Jenny Pacillio and District 5 Councilor Etel Haxhijaj have all released statements in condemning anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric before Tuesday's meeting. In his statement, King denounced "full-fledged hate that is foundational in these targeted attacks upon our City Council members."

"The targeted threats, vitriol and abominable hate the Councilor Nguyen and others are being subjected to is despicable and unconscionable," King wrote. "I thoroughly support Councilor Thu Nguyen's regrouping process and the time dedication that it necessitates."

During Tuesday's meeting, Petty defended his apology about misgendering Nguyen and pushed back on the idea that the council has a toxic culture.

"I've never disrespected anyone in this community and I will not allow any toxic environment," Petty said.

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