

## **Speakers rally against anti-gay comments at Richmond council meeting**

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The message at Tuesday's City Council meeting was loud and clear: Anti-gay comments have little place in Richmond's public discourse.

Supporters of Richmond's LGBT community packed the council chamber Tuesday in response to the May 22 meeting, during which two or three residents used their public comment time to question the morality of gay and lesbian relationships. The comments were made after a civic proclamation in which council members and teens from the local RYSE youth center declared June as Gay Pride Month in the city.

After the May 22 meeting, YouTube clips and other Internet chatter helped feed a backlash against the comments, which marred an otherwise upbeat ceremony.

RYSE Center youths, along with adult leaders, joined county Supervisor John Gioia's office in organizing the response Tuesday, including blasting out electronic news releases to email lists urging people to turn out.

More than 20 speakers Tuesday expressed support for the city's growing LGBT community, especially teens. Several noted that rates of depression and suicide among LGBT teens and young adults are higher than those of their heterosexual counterparts.

Gioia, wearing a yellow armband to signify solidarity with Tuesday's demonstration, addressed the council.

"I'm proud to be standing here with the young people," Gioia said. "Because when RYSE was founded, it was on the model that young people need adult allies."

The RYSE Center

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was opened in 2008 with public and private funds, thanks to community partnerships forged in part by Gioia and his staff.

On Tuesday, each member of the City Council signed a pledge condemning hate and intolerance and arranged to host a public study session on LGBT issues later this month.

"We want to share with our young people that we love them and accept them for who they are," Councilwoman Jovanka Beckles said.

Resident Mark Wassberg, one of the men whose anti-gay comments May 22 triggered Tuesday's response, was escorted from the chamber by police after launching into a profanity-laced rant. The audience cheered his removal.

"We have a chance here tonight to be role models for our young people, and to say when hate is wrong, we call it out, and we stick with them," said Gioia, drawing applause. "What they are saying is whether you are gay or straight, there is a place for you in Richmond."