

'Vigilante violence' concerns lead DougCo commissioners to weigh canceling PrideFest



A screenshot from a past Douglas County PrideFest event. Photo by Castle Rock Pride

 By Mike McKibbin / NewsBreak Denver / Aug. 22, 2023

[DOUGLAS COUNTY, COLO.] — Concerns about potential vigilante violence at this Saturday's [Douglas County PrideFest](#) event led the county commissioners to consider canceling the LGBTQAI+ event during their Tuesday administrative meeting.

Commissioner George Teal said an email the commissioners received from PrideFest advocates seemed to "outright advocate for vigilante violence" and motioned the county to cancel the event, held at the county fairgrounds and sponsored by [Castle Rock Pride](#). It failed on a 1-2 vote, with commissioners Abe Laydon and Lora Thomas opposed.

PrideFest has been the focus of public comments by those worried about a repeat of last year's event — where a drag show performer had a "wardrobe malfunction" and exposed fake female breasts to an audience that included children — at [several Castle Rock Town Council meetings](#) over the last month and a half.

'Vitriolic comments' disagreement

"These are not unmerited or unwarranted concerns," Laydon said. "I know Pride is concerned with people coming to the event and recording it and all the vitriolic comments at the town council meetings. But I have faith our government law enforcement agencies are very capable of handling this event."

Teal disagreed with Laydon's comments about the tone of the town council comments.

"There were no calls for violence or vigilante violence at any of the Castle Rock Town Council meetings," he said. "It's the proponents who called for vigilante preparation or violence. All we heard from the opponents was a call for transparency or (concern about minors having) access."

Teal added Castle Rock Pride was essentially calling for speech contrary to their views to be curtailed.

"It's almost a Kafkaesque drama," he said. "I think it's gone too far so we need to move along. And if it ends up with a judicial review, let it be, that's how the system works. This is a threat to domestic tranquility."

Call for help issued by Pride supporters

Along with the PrideFest email, a firearms training event that apparently included some people concerned about PrideFest was held at a county ranch. Thomas noted that led to a Facebook post by Michael Clarkson, PrideFest chief of security, to seek volunteers to show up and support the event and participants.

"This is an all-hands-on-deck call," Clarkson wrote. "I need people willing to show up and support the LGBTQIA+ community. We need people to be a show of strength and unity against hate. Local hate groups are threatening our event and the county rules and regulations have really hamstrung securing the event. Because of Douglas County's rules, we have to allow open carry and cannot eject someone from the event without a clear cause."

"As such, security volunteers with police, military, and private security backgrounds are especially needed, but all volunteers are welcome to be our eyes and ears," Clarkson continued. "... If we show up in enough numbers, we can prevent violence before it starts. Let's protect the community and keep the hate away with a wall of love."

Castle Rock Pride posted an open message on Facebook Tuesday morning regarding safety concerns.

"We recognize that some members of our community have reservations around attending, and we feel it is crucial to highlight our unwavering commitment to safety," the group wrote. "Our organization has been working independently and in collaboration with the Douglas County Sheriff's Office for months to create a comprehensive safety plan. We will have both (sheriff's deputies) and a dedicated PrideFest security team onsite for the entirety of the event. (That team) is comprised of veterans and former law enforcement professionals who are part of, or allies to, the LGBTQIA+ community."

Laydon noted Sheriff Darren Weekly posted that his department and Castle Rock police had planned for all contingencies to ensure a safe event.