

Texas' first openly transgender mayor finds 'amazing' support in McKinney suburb

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Updated Thursday with reaction from other New Hope residents.

NEW HOPE -- As the mayor of a tiny McKinney suburb, Jess Herbst imagined the worst after she came out as a transgender woman at this week's council meeting.

Instead, her town lived up to its name, she said, and the residents of New Hope have been nothing short of "amazing."

"I was hoping for tolerance, and what I've gotten is overwhelming support," Herbst said Wednesday, a day after the meeting and two weeks after she wrote an open letter to residents online.

Herbst, 58, was thrust into her role as mayor in May when her predecessor died of a heart attack. At the time, she was an alderman and went by the name Jeff.

Her unanimous appointment by fellow council members inspired her to be "as honest to them as possible" with who she is — the state's first openly transgender mayor.

"I live my life as a female now," her letter reads, "and I will be performing my duties to the town as such."

Alderman Bob Parmelee has been on the council about 12 years and said residents at the meeting Tuesday were "very positive."

"As long as a person does a good job as mayor, and she is doing a good job as mayor," he said.



Collin County is traditionally conservative, and the town of New Hope has a population of 700, including cattle raisers, city people and "some of everybody," Parmelee said.

Herbst expected some snide comments and negative rhetoric online. But she hasn't seen much of that in the 2,000-plus emails she has received and in her day-to-day interactions with people.

Herbst said she was hoping for tolerance but has been amazed by the support she has received. (Jae S. Lee/Staff Photographer)

"I think that it's a lot harder to be negative toward people when they are directly in front of you. It puts a face on it," she said.

Herbst decided to [pen the letter](#) to control the narrative because she knew people would find out eventually, and she invites anyone to read about her experiences at her blog, [JessHerbst.com](#).

"Most people don't have to be this upfront," she said, "but this is where I landed."

Being upfront may not help Herbst if she seeks election, noted James Keel, who built his home in New Hope nine months ago.

"I don't think he would've been voted in looking like that," Keel said Thursday as he added a fence to his property. "He looked like a man the last time I saw him."

"It is what it is," he shrugged.

Patrice Wheeler has lived in New Hope since 2005 and owns about 26 acres near Town Hall. She attended Tuesday night's Town Council meeting.

"I don't care about like being transgender," Wheeler said. "I want you to do your job and act on behalf of the citizens."

A native of Greenville, Herbst graduated in 1977 and moved with wife Debbie and their two daughters to Debbie's hometown of New Hope in 1999. Herbst joined the town council in 2003 and has been an alderman, road commissioner and mayor pro tem.

She came out to her family and close friends eight years ago. Her wife of 36 years knew the truth early on in their relationship.

Debbie Herbst said she's relieved that her community now knows what she's known for years and is able to be honest with her colleagues and others.

"I don't have to worry about hiding anymore," she said. "My husband presents himself as a woman. It's still the same person if you knew him before you know him now."

Debbie Herbst said that she and Jess are closer than ever. "We've been soul mates and together for such a long, long time and we still love each other the same, even more so," Debbie Herbst said.

While some may believe that transgender people change their sexual orientation after transitioning, Jess Herbst said she's still attracted to women. Herbst began hormone replacement therapy two years ago "for my gender identity and not for sexual orientation," she said.

Herbst was inspired when Olympic gold medalist Bruce Jenner came out as

transgender in early 2015 and identified as Caitlyn Jenner. At the time, Herbst was a few months into her hormone replacement therapy and said Jenner "brought the word 'transgender' to public attention."



- Herbst told New Hope residents in a letter that she would "continue as mayor and hope to do the very best for the town." (Jae S. Lee/Staff Photographer)
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She also credits the internet with helping her fully explore who she is, from the supportive community she has found with her blog to simply being able to purchase size 12 women's shoes.

"I didn't think anybody else felt like the way that I did," Herbst said. "It was obviously something I kept hidden because, if you can't relate to someone else, you just think gee, I'm weird."

Early last fall, after she was appointed mayor, Herbst came out as transgender to her colleagues at Town Hall and to her customers as a self-employed computer technician.

She was surprised when they supported her.

"You have to be honest if you're going to be in a place in public office," she said. "It's your responsibility to the people."

Among the supportive emails she has received are messages from other public officials in the area saying they're also transgender, she said. She'll be meeting with them to talk about how she has handled her identity.

"There are way more of us than most people understand," Herbst said. "The more people are honest, the easier it's going to become for the rest of us to come out and be public about who we really are."