

ICYMI: Pittsburgh Post-Gazette: Tree of Life leaders voice support for ATF nominee

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This week, faith and community leaders from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania announced their support for Steve Dettelbach's nomination to head the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF). These endorsements come as backing for Dettelbach's nomination continues to gain momentum.

Local community leaders, including Jewish leaders from Pittsburgh's Tree of Life synagogue, penned letters to the Senate Judiciary Committee in support of Dettelbach, citing a recent rise in anti-religious crime and Dettelbach's experience prosecuting perpetrators of hate crimes.

"It's also about violent extremism and anti-religious crime over a growing number of years now, and Steve's history as a U.S. attorney prosecuting hate crime and anti-religious crimes during his tenure," Pittsburgh-based corporate attorney and chair of the Tree of Life steering committee Jeffrey Letwin told the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette.

In the short time since his nomination was announced, Dettelbach has amassed wide, bipartisan support from mayors of over 100 major cities, as well as support from law enforcement and former top federal prosecutors. Additionally, eight former ATF directors, as well as former agents and personnel have also offered endorsement of Dettelbach.

Read more below:

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette: [Tree of Life leaders voice support for ATF nominee](#)

[Ashley Murray, 6/1/22]

Just over three and a half years after a gunman killed 11 in Pittsburgh's Tree of Life synagogue in the largest anti-Semitic attack in recent U.S. history, those involved in an organized campaign to move forward after the tragedy are voicing their support for the Biden administration's pick to lead the federal agency charged with enforcing gun laws — an agency that has not had a leader in place since 2015.

At least three members of the local Jewish community who lead or serve on committees driving security and redevelopment decisions following the Tree of Life massacre have scheduled meetings with, and written letters in support of, former U.S. Attorney Steven Dettelbach as the nominee for director of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives.

Mr. Dettelbach, who served in the Northern District of Ohio, received a confirmation hearing before the Senate Judiciary Committee last week. His nomination must be approved by a simple majority in the evenly split upper chamber, where Vice President Kamala Harris can cast the tie-breaking vote.

Local community leaders in their letters to Senate leadership and the Pennsylvania delegation described recent meetings with Mr. Dettelbach and said the nominee is of "sound moral character" and an "excellent choice" for the position.

"I have had the opportunity to meet Mr. Dettelbach, review his resume, and engage in pointed discussions about his beliefs and vision for the Bureau," wrote Dr. Jeffrey Cohen, a local physician, CEO of a Pittsburgh-based life sciences company and co-chair of the Remember Renew Rebuild campaign for Tree of Life. "... My professional career has dealt with disease, threat detection and hate crimes. All three fundamentally attack innocent citizens from different directions. All three areas require others to stand up, help their neighbors and mitigate a problem.

"I always feel more optimistic about the longevity and resiliency of our society when well-qualified community leaders like Mr. Dettelbach stand up to serve with compassion and pragmatism."

Pittsburgh-based corporate attorney Jeffrey Letwin, the chair of the Tree of Life steering committee who arranged some of Mr. Dettelbach's meetings with the leaders, said their support is not exclusively about gun regulations.

“It’s also about violent extremism and anti-religious crime over a growing number of years now, and Steve’s history as a U.S. attorney prosecuting hate crime and anti-religious crimes during his tenure,” he told the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette Wednesday.

Mr. Dettelbach, of Cleveland, served for roughly six years under the Obama administration during which he prosecuted a religiously motivated hate crime in northeastern Ohio’s Amish community that made global headlines. In another high profile religiously motivated attack handled by his office an Indiana man pleaded guilty to lighting fire to an Islamic center in a Toledo suburb.

A federal hate crime case in Pennsylvania’s Western District against the accused Tree of Life gunman is pending.

Mr. Dettelbach has garnered numerous endorsements from law enforcement, former ATF directors and other former Department of Justice officials.

During his previously scheduled confirmation hearing last week, which fell a day after a gunman killed 19 children and two teachers at a Texas elementary school, some Republican senators pressed Mr. Dettelbach on previous statements he made in support of an assault-style weapons ban during his unsuccessful 2018 run to become Ohio’s attorney general.

Mr. Dettelbach said during the hearing that “Violent crime is increasing. Firearms violence and mass shootings are increasing. Hate crimes and religious violence are increasing, as is violent extremism. If confirmed, I promise to do everything I can to enforce the law, to respect the Constitution of the United States and to partner with law enforcement to protect the safety and the rights of innocent and law-abiding Americans.”

The White House points to the agency as pivotal to its plans to reduce gun crime, including combatting so-called ghost guns, or privately made weapons that don’t have serial numbers, and has requested a budget increase to hire hundreds of new agents and personnel.

Allegheny County Executive Rich Fitzgerald also wrote a letter in support of Mr. Dettelbach’s confirmation; his was addressed to Pennsylvania Sens. Bob Casey and Pat Toomey.

A spokeswoman for Mr. Fitzgerald said the county leader weighs in on federal nominations “on occasion” but felt compelled to write the letter after his counterpart in Cuyahoga County, Ohio, reached out.

“He just believes it’s been a long time since the ATF has had a leader, and it’s beyond time for that to occur specifically because of everything going on,” the spokeswoman said.

Like other metropolitan areas, Pittsburgh and some of its surrounding communities have seen an increase in gun violence, particularly among youth.

Mr. Casey, D-Pa., said that the number of years that have lapsed since the last ATF director is “unacceptable.”

“Between mass shootings across the country and increasingly frequent gun violence in our cities — including Pittsburgh — we need to use every tool available at the federal level to fight this uniquely American crisis. That includes confirming an ATF Director to enforce our gun laws and keep our communities safe,” he said in a statement.

Mr. Toomey, R-Pa., has a meeting scheduled with the nominee and “looks forward to the meeting with Mr. Dettelbach and evaluating his record,” according to a spokeswoman.

The office of Sen. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., a likely swing vote, did not comment Tuesday.

A vote in the Senate Judiciary Committee has not yet been scheduled and will likely not occur for a couple of weeks.

Mr. Dettelbach is President Joe Biden’s second nominee to fill the post. Mr. Biden withdrew his first pick, former ATF agent and gun control advocate David Chipman, following unified opposition from Republican senators and from some Democrats and Independents.

Former President Donald Trump in 2020 also withdrew his chosen nominee, former Fraternal Order of Police president Chuck Canterberry, after facing Republican opposition.

The position became subject to Senate approval in 2006.

The ATF is charged with enforcing federal firearms regulations, including commerce and licensing regulations.