New Bill to Repeal New York's Gay Bathhouse Ban Is Long Overdue: What You Need to Know

"Outdated laws and policies such as this ban are relics of a time when HIV was a very different disease."

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When you think about gay hookup culture in New York City, many things come to mind: nightclubs and dive bars in Hell's Kitchen and Bushwick, circuit parties, the second floor of the Eagle in Chelsea or logging onto Grindr to talk to hundreds of headless torsos in a one-mile radius.

But one thing that is essentially nonexistent in the Big Apple is the gay bathhouse. And for a queer-friendly city in 2026, that is abnormal. You have Steamworks, a chain that's been called the "emblem of queer empowerment," in Toronto, Seattle, Chicago and Berkeley, Calif. And in Paris, London, Hong Kong, Melbourne and so many other big cities, gay men flock to bathhouses after the club.

So when State Senator Erik Bottcher called me the other day to tell me he and Assemblymember Tony Simone were introducing a new bill to repeal an over 40-year ban on adult bathhouses in New York, I was surprised—frankly, I didn't even know there was a ban. At the same time, I finally had the answer to the question I'd been asking myself for 12 years: How in the world are there no frequented bathhouses in this extremely gay city?

Bottcher and Simone's answer is simple: They had been banned during the HIV/AIDS crisis in a purported attempt to fight the spread of the disease. "Those emergency measures were adopted at a time when little was known about HIV/AIDS and before the development of effective treatment, PrEP and PEP [pre- and post-exposure prophylaxis to prevent HIV], routine HIV testing, and many of the prevention strategies that have transformed public health over the past four decades," their press release about the bill states. "While the public health landscape has changed dramatically, New York's regulations have not."

For those who have never explored a bathhouse, they typically feel like a labyrinth of saunas, steam rooms, dark rooms and glory holes. Dozens of men walk around nude or in just a towel, looking for casual fun with an anonymous guy—or six.

Perry Halkitis, the Dean of Rutgers School of Public Health, says the ban is rooted in stigma. “This legislation is a welcome step forward,” he texted me. “Unfortunately, outdated laws and policies such as this—and, even more importantly, HIV criminalization laws that remain on the books in many states—are relics of a time when HIV was a very different disease. We must continue the work of dismantling these policies.”

Bathhouses have a long and storied history in the United States, dating back to the 19th and early 20th centuries, when they were built in lower-income communities to promote good hygiene. By the 1950s and 60s, bathhouses largely had become rendezvous spots for gay men, prompting occasional raids because gay sex was still criminalized. And by the 1970s, there were nearly 200 gay bathhouses in cities across the country.

New York State passed its ban on bathhouses as sex venues in 1985, at a time when there were 16,458 HIV/AIDS infections in the United States, and more than half of those infections were fatal. New York City officials warned establishment owners to “ban ‘dangerous sex’ or be put out of business.” Around this time, several other jurisdictions known for having large gay communities—including San Francisco, Los Angeles County, Miami-Dade County and Minneapolis—passed similar laws.

Only now, four decades later, are we starting to see these bans overturned. Bottcher and Simone’s bill is being introduced after Minneapolis recently repealed its 38-year ban. And San Francisco has also moved away from straight-up bans, implementing regulations that allow bathhouses to operate. However, L.A. and Miami’s bans remain on the books.

Halkitis says these reversals are overdue: “It is long past time for our laws and social policies to catch up with the extraordinary biomedical advances that have transformed HIV into a manageable chronic condition for those with access to effective treatment,” he says. “Too often, these policies have been rooted not in science or public health, but in fear, stigma, and, in many cases, homophobia.”



View this post on Instagram

A post shared by Erik Bottcher (@ebottcher)

In related news, click through the Instagram post above to read the N.Y. lawmakers press release on lifting the ban. It adds that “by allowing licensed, regulated facilities to operate under clear health and safety standards, public health agencies would have greater opportunities to provide HIV and STI prevention resources, connect patrons to testing and treatment, conduct inspections and address legitimate health concerns. Regulated, licensed establishments offer a safer alternative than pushing activity into unregulated settings where there is little opportunity for public health engagement”

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