

Anti-Black Racism Task Force member questions mission of Committee

For the last few months, members of Aurora's Anti-Racism and Anti-Black Racism Task Force have been providing input on a proposed new mural celebrating Canada's diversity, but there is much more work to be done beyond the arts sphere, says Task Force member Phiona Durrant.

Ms. Durrant, a business owner in Aurora's historic downtown core, has been a member of the Task Force since its inception and made a delegation to Council members last week to express her frustration on the work that has been carried out to date.

"I am very concerned about how the committees are built," she said. "What is the plan? What is the strategy? I am wondering if this is a working group because I have not seen any action yet for this group. When a group is created, that is not the action. That is the place where the action is supposed to be taking place, being planned and done."

She shared with Council that she felt "lost and unsafe" within the group because it is not clear what their goal is.

"I think the hiccup or the problem is the group was created and the Town put a wall project on us and left us with that," she continued. "From November to now, all we're talking about is a wall and nothing to deal with what the terms of reference says. Also, no practical procedures and guidelines have been given to me on how to do this successfully."

"Now I feel that the task force I am on, which is supposed to be effective and great, I feel it is divided," she said, adding that she felt like the mural was sent to the Task Force as a done deal. "It is not like something we could critique or have a say on."

Her comments were taken to heart by Council and they sparked a lengthy discussion not just on the Task Force but the Town's citizen-led committees as a whole.

In addressing Ms. Durrant's concerns, Council members praised the Task Force for the initiatives they undertook for February's Black History Month, as well as the work Ms. Durrant and her team at the Aurora Black Community Facebook group took on and executed throughout the late winter. But they urged the group to forge ahead.

"I don't want you or anyone on a committee to feel unsafe and to feel like you are not contributing," said Councillor Sandra Humfries. "One of the things I think is a little tricky from what I hear from you and other members is that when they have an idea, they don't know where that idea goes and you can't really ratify an idea at a committee-level. The minutes come to Council and we review them through a staff report and then we ratify ideas. We need to understand these issues where we can listen and set the right policies to enable committees to feel they are contributing and they feel good about what they are doing."

From Councillor John Gallo's perspective, "expectations [of the Task Force] were somewhat different from reality." He noted that committees once made recommendations to Council, including motions, but this duty was removed in favour of minutes from the meetings coming forward for Council's review.

"That changed and if you look at the Committee minutes now, Council just receives and doesn't necessarily take action on what the Committees were discussing or moving forward," he said. "It is a bit of a change. Maybe a discussion should happen again. Maybe we should have a higher-level discussion of why we want committees, what we want committees to do, and the value of committees. I think that is somewhat the frustration you're experiencing."

Aurora established the Anti-Racism and Anti-Black Racism Task Force last fall following a motion from Councillor Harold Kim. Speaking to Ms. Durrant's concerns, Councillor Kim said "the concept of the Task Force is to give advice and perspective to Council whenever items that pertain to that group is going to be discussed at Council."

"When it comes to heritage or accessibility, there is a new development, or a renovation that is coming relative to a heritage home,

then it will go to that advisory committee for their input [and] their perspective because of their experience and so forth," he said. "If the Task Force did not want to provide the perspective on a particular item, the Task Force has the prerogative to say, that is not something we want to weigh in on. I think almost everyone wanted to weigh in on the mural. I empathize [with] those who may not want to talk about the item at hand, but that is the role of the advisory committee."

On the part of Mayor Mrakas, he encouraged the Task Force to look at goals and "clearly lay them on the table."

"I think that is something all our committees need to do," he said. "I think it is a great structure to have because it allows you to achieve something and you know what you're striving for. Once you create the plan and you have goals, then you can break off into sub-groups that want to work on each of those goals and have more informal conversations and bring those conversations back to the structured Task Force."

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter