

Donation, process to make Diversity Mural a reality draws questions from some Councillors

Although a new mural celebrating Canadian diversity won the full support of Council last year, turning over some of the details to the Town's Anti-Black Racism and Anti-Racism Task Force without direction from lawmakers raised questions around the Council table last week.

Since late last fall the Town's Anti-Black Racism and Anti-Racism Task Force have been brainstorming ideas for the mural in their public meetings, but facing recommendations last week to take the mural to the next level, Councillor John Gallo raised objections not only to this work being carried out but a \$10,000 donation from Smart Centres to make the project a reality.

In voicing his objection, Councillor Gallo cited a motion passed by Council last October calling on staff to investigate possible locations for a second mural. A subsequent report, he says, listed a motion that went beyond what Council approved.

"Each and every one of us discussed the motion that was before us," said Councillor Gallo. "We all supported it, which was directing staff to investigate locations in Aurora. There was no talk about sending this to the Anti-Black Racism and Anti-Racism Task Force. There was no discussion about a subcommittee. There was no direction other than finding a location and reporting back to us. It looks like a lot of work has been done and I never voted for any of that to happen."

The work of the Task Force has been carried out publicly since last December.

Project manager Phil Rose said following Council's approval of the initial motion he was made a point person to "run with the project" and formed a mural subcommittee out of the Task Force to provide input.

"In addition to talking about the location, we talk about what obviously could go at that location and all the details of actually going ahead with releasing the call to artists" to actually executing the artwork," he said. "I can't speak necessarily to how it got to the Task Force, but I have been running with it and collaborating with that Task Force."

Councillor Gallo contended he didn't have an issue with the Task Force "weighing in" but said Council should have been involved in a discussion on "who might weigh in on this subject."

"Words matter and what I approved was for staff to come back with locations," he said. "There was no direction to staff to go out to any committee, go out to any subcommittees, to do any of that. I have a problem with that because I had not had an opportunity to express my opinion. I may have wanted other groups to be a part of that. It is just not the way it should be done."

A similar view was offered by Councillor Rachel Gilliland who said that while she "loved" the fact the Task Force was weighing in, and that it was a "very appropriate" place for that to happen, she questioned how it came to be.

"I understand there is a majority of four group members from this Task Force, one staff, and one professional artist, whatever that means, but I am wondering would it not be beneficial to reach out to the York Region [Arts] Council and have one of the artists on this committee as well" or a member of the Aurora Cultural Centre Board, some of the people who have expertise in art. I think it goes hand in hand. I feel there are some missing parts on how we can make this more inclusive within our process. I feel like we have been kind of presented this tonight without the backstory on how we got to where we are today without getting any direction."

Additional concerns were raised by Councillor Gallo on a donation of \$10,000 towards the mural by Smart Centres which, as The Auroran reported this past winter, was announced by Councillor Harold Kim during a meeting of the Task Force.

"No information, no nothing," he said of the information that had come to Council regarding the contribution, noting that in his view Smart Centres had relevant planning applications before Council. "I am happy they are donating, but I have not had the opportunity

to have any discussions, any debate on that. Is their name going to be on it? I don't know. I have no idea. If that is the case, could we have gone to the community and solicited funds? Could we have reached out to other people? I have no idea. It is two very significant points that turned something really good unto something very awkward.?

Responding to this, Councillor Kim said he received the green light from the Town's Integrity Commissioner on the donation and was assured there were no ?pending decisions or projects for this potential donor.?

?This is no different than any other Town activity, whether it be the Multicultural Festival, the Haunted Forest?the Mayor's Charity Golf Tournament. We canvass our corporate partners all the time. If these corporate partners?can contribute to a worthwhile cause such as this, I think it is worth canvassing instead of saying that there is a conflict of interest, that it was not ethical. People can say what they want, but I contacted the Commissioner, everything was on the up and up. The funds are going directly to the Town for this project.?

Pressed by Councillor Gallo on whether their donation would include the donors' name on the finished product, Councillor Kim said that was a conversation between the representative and the Town's CAO.

?It wouldn't surprise me if it is included,? he said. ?To my mind, it is likely it would because with any other donation?all the donors are recognized.?

Despite these concerns, other Council members said they believed the mural project was in the right hands.

?I feel this is in the right hands and the right place,? said Councillor Sandra Humfryes. ?I need to rely heavily on the professionals for this one. It's a joyous celebration. We all love it; we all feel it is important. Maybe the process didn't, in some ways, maybe feels not 100 per cent the way it should have been appreciated. For me, I feel really comfortable at this point that it is in the right hands and there is further public consultation.?

Added Councillor Kim: ?This is a valuable and important project for the community. All this talk about process, which is important, I am not sure if it is about process or something else, the end goal of what this project symbolizes is very important. We spend 95 per cent of our time discussing process and every time we have a significant project it winds down to process, which staff confirmed it is fine in the end.?

At the end of the debate, Councillors voted to receive the report pending further information from staff.

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter