

Emotions erupt in Council chambers as Heiniu's owners get chance to speak

Emotions ran high in Council Chambers last week as the owners of Heiniu, a rottweiler who died during an animal control call in East Gwillimbury involving Aurora officers, finally had the chance to speak out to local lawmakers.

The chance to speak came at the May 26 Council meeting where dozens of participants held a peaceful protest outside of Town Hall and onto John West Way demanding answers from the Town of Aurora and its Animal Control department on just what happened during the May 5 call, where Heiniu, one of two dogs corralled after being found running at large, died.

Several of the demonstrators came inside and filled Council Chambers once the meeting got underway. Although they weren't formally listed on the evening's agenda to speak, they demanded their time, calling for "leadership" from the stands.

"Just before we start, I'm sure we'll share the sentiment of many people that are here regarding the incident - the terrible incident regarding a dog and a precious pet," said Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo at the start of the meeting, addressing those who had come inside. "There's nothing on the agenda, so we won't be formally speaking to it?but I thought it would be important to just communicate to you that notwithstanding the fact that we cannot say much about it, that we're doing, the Town is doing, we're all doing our very best to figure out exactly what happened, and what course to take, so that things like this never happen."

Those in attendance began demanding their time following an unrelated first delegation to Council, with calls getting progressively louder until Mayor Tom Mrakas moved to clear the Council Chamber as the situation was sorted out.

A 35-minute Council recess ensued, during which York Regional Police were put on standby. After Councillor Gallo met with the family and the demonstrators in the crowd, Council reconvened and ultimately agreed to waive formal procedures to allow the Yu family to speak at the podium.

"Thank you for being here and for paying attention to hear our story," said Yang Yu, speaking at the podium through a translator. "Our position is simple: we want the truth. We want our relevant records preserved and reviewed. We want the full timeline. We want an independent investigation. We want accountability. This is not about attacking individuals, this is about understanding what happened during a public service response and making sure this never happens to another family or another animal. We are asking for the relevant records, including car notes, dispatch information, witness accounts, officer notes, and the full timeline. We're also asking for an independent investigation."

"Our family is here peacefully. We believe the community deserves clear answers [and] truth for Heiniu."

Yang's wife, Emma Ge, said since the incident happened, she's been unable to sleep and her children have been troubled.

"I want everyone to know," she said, referring to witness statements and videos captured in the aftermath of the incident.

Following the delegations, Mayor Mrakas said the investigation continues and information will be released where possible.

"This is a very upsetting situation for everyone," he said. "I don't think any one of us can have an understanding of what the family is going through on a personal level. We've all had dogs. I've had two dogs, I lost my dog, I couldn't even bear it, so I can't even imagine what the family is going through - but, as I stated, there's a review and investigation occurring."

"At this point, I have no other information. As I said, once that information is available?we're going to make it public."

"We're working with everyone to try and find a solution and a resolution and find out the truth about this all, so anything that needs to be accountable will be accountable," he concluded.

Following the meeting, the family reflected on their experience at Council through a public statement.

"I am responding clearly and publicly because the community deserves facts and not vague statements," said Yu. "Heiniu was our family member. He died during municipal Animal Services handling. That fact alone requires a serious, transparent, evidence-based review. But over the past few weeks, we have seen public statements, official emails, and online framing that avoid the central question: What happened to Heiniu after Animal Services took control?"

Yu contended a May 7 public statement in which Mayor Mrakas said a staff member was injured "as a result of a dog bite" shaped the "public narrative" in Heiniu's conduct.

"It placed a serious allegation into the public record before the full evidence had been reviewed," he said. "So, I'm asking a direct question: What verified evidence supported that public statement at the time? Was there a completed investigation? Was there a medical report? Was there an incident report? Was there a police finding? Were key civilian witnesses interviewed? Was our family given the opportunity to respond before that statement was released? If the answer is no, then the public deserves to know why that statement was released in that form.

"The Town cannot say, on the one hand, that no conclusions could be made before all the evidence is reviewed, while, on the other hand, allowing an earlier public statement to shape the narrative before the evidence was complete. You cannot ask the public to wait for the facts after already influencing how the public sees the facts.

"Speaking at Council was not part of our original plan. Emma felt unwell, and we had already left. We returned because we were contacted and asked to come back to speak. If I had known we would be speaking I would have prepared properly. Once given the opportunity, we spoke respectfully and from our hearts. We are grateful to the Council members who voted to allow us to speak. That opportunity came through Council's formal decision. It was not a personal favour from any one individual."

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