

## Tensions rise over Diversity Mural funding

Tensions rose once again around the Council table last week over donations made to fund the creation of Aurora's Diversity Mural.

Questions were raised last month by Councillor John Gallo regarding a donation of \$10,000 to the project from SmartCentres, which continues to plan its retail expansion in Aurora ? a donation which was announced to the Town's Anti-Black and Anti-Racism Task Force this past winter.

?It grieves me when something as worthy as this is challenged and excuses come up as to why it should be delayed,? said Councillor Kim, responding to comments from Councillor Gallo that Council should hold off on the project until the completion of a municipal policy on public art.

?We approved unanimously the retaining wall mural on Yonge Street. That was drafted by staff, the diversity mural is following the same process, as per staff, as the Yonge Street mural and the only difference is the subject matter is diversity. Yet the diversity mural has had a much more challenging time getting the go-ahead. If one is averse to the diversity mural going forward, just say so. There is no need to make up some kind of excuse about delays, the process, or even mentioning funding.

?Since when is saving taxpayer money a bad thing? How many times have we sat around the Council Chambers, especially during budget time when we question staff about Corporate Sponsorship and donations? to help with operating costs??

To underscore his point, Councillor Kim offered a solution of his own: challenging Council to pass a motion to the effect of, ?Let's have the taxpayers pay for this.?

?The objective is something good for our community,? he continued. ?In the end, Council will make a decision, but I have to remind everyone that this is the same process that was followed in the retaining wall on Yonge Street, which was unanimous and that didn't even have a diversity topic. Please vote with your conscience and what you think is best for the Town.?

Councillor Gallo did not let Councillor Kim's statement go unquestioned.

From his perspective, there were more differences on the table between the retaining wall mural program approved by Council ? one honouring frontline heroes on the fight against COVID-19 ? and what has been proposed for the diversity mural.

?You're referring to the only difference from the other mural to this is diversity, insinuating that that is the reason why I am not in favour of this? is not only insulting but embarrassing because it couldn't be farther from the truth,? said Councillor Gallo. ?I supported this and I want it to happen, but it needs to be done right and to suggest that corporate sponsorship with a logo should be explored and perhaps we can do better, if that is negative, so be it. That's what I believe and that is what we should be doing. To suggest that maybe we can explore in detail other locations, what's wrong with that? It is nothing to do with not approving a location. Yes, is it the same process we took with the other one, absolutely, but on second thought can we not say, ?Okay, maybe I made a mistake with that?' What's wrong with changing your mind?

?Those are my issues: in the absence of a fulsome policy, we're making these decisions and if we're going to do that, it is going to take even more time to get it right. These things don't go away. If you're making a correlation between me suggesting a corporate sponsor shouldn't have their logo on there or should have a public process, me suggesting we should put some time into a proper location and maybe that corner? making the jump that it is a diversity issue? is just ridiculous and it shouldn't even be coming out of anyone's mouth. I'll take the view that you didn't mean it that way but that is how I interpreted it and I didn't appreciate it.?

Councillor Rachel Gilliland, who has stated her opposition to the process, joined the conversation, stating that while it is a ?great initiative? she felt the decisions had already been made before Council had a formal chance to weigh in.

?It was announced we're having funding at a Task Force committee meeting in January before Council was officially notified and then written in the paper, and we're officially told about it now? I kind of feel I have been in the dark the entire time,? she said. ?I feel there is a process that has been missing there.?

But Councillor Kim pressed on, responding to Councillor Gallo's rebuttal insisting there was ?nothing implied? in his comments.

?I was just commenting that there is no difference other than that point and there's no reason there should be such great debate over this one,? he said. ?It's like you guys are trying to put in a 'gotcha' moment, which is highly unfortunately adversarial, which is not the type of environment that I wish to work in. I have always said and I think it is mentioned a couple of times that it is not about who has the great idea, it is about supporting the great idea. The tone that I am receiving, that I received in GC (General Committee) and here tonight, it is very adversarial, it is not about cooperation or partnership. That is the tone I get. It's subjective but that's the tone I'm getting. For me, I put this out there because I thought it was an important project for the Town. I didn't think this was going to receive so much backlash. The fact that a couple of you are focusing on the corporate donation and the sponsorship as opposed to the other aspects of the project, it is befuddling to me. It makes it more personal as opposed to trying to build something together.

?I almost regret moving this forward.?

**By Brock Weir**EditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter