

June 17, 2020

From City Manager

Dear members of Vancouver's Black and African diaspora communities:

Over the past weeks, cities across North America, including our own, have been ignited with frustration, pain, and anger at the ongoing hate and violence targeting Black people. The recent killing of Black people including Minneapolis resident George Floyd by police on May 25 and the death of Regis Korchinski-Paquet in Toronto have served to reinforce the impacts of individual and systemic racism towards Black community members and has resulted in calls for justice and meaningful actions to combat anti-Black racism and work toward equity.

First, I want to acknowledge the historic, painful and deep impacts that anti-Black racism has had and continues to have on you, your families, and loved ones. I know the impacts are profound – deep, lasting, and compounding. I know that racialized discrimination, threats of violence and the experience and witnessing of violence create trauma that results in psychological, physical, spiritual, social and economic harm, and reduces life chances.

In December 2018, I sent out a statement to City staff, expressing my support for our Black staff and denouncing anti-Black racism in recognition of the important and active discussions arising from experiences of Black youth in our community. I did not at that time write a letter to the community.

Today, I am writing this open letter to express my commitment to you, as the head of Vancouver's civic administration, to clearly and publicly acknowledge that we stand as allies with Vancouver's Black communities, acknowledge that anti-Black racism is a part of Vancouver's past and current context, and recognize that we as local government have a moral and civic duty to take action against it. I know you have been waiting for the City to say something more than the statements we have issued in recent weeks denouncing anti-Black racism and recognizing the protests in Vancouver. Thank you for your patience – I wanted to be sure we had mapped out some meaningful next steps before reaching out to you.

As an immediate next step – and in recognition of the urgent need to formally start our public discussion on anti-Black racism – the City will host a virtual Town Hall for the Black and African diaspora communities, hosted by myself and Sandra Singh, the General Manager of Arts, Culture, and Community Services. Staff are working to secure a date at the end of June and are seeking to engage community facilitation to support the dialogue. I hope you will join me so that I can hear directly from you about your experiences, frustrations, hopes, and suggested actions. From this, we will move forward, ideally in partnership with community and other public partners. We also know that we have our own work to do as an organization and that internal focus also has my commitment. More information will follow soon

about how to be involved. For now, please email equity@vancouver.ca with any questions, concerns, or suggestions.

I also want to provide you with an overview of previous actions the City has taken to counter anti-racism generally and anti-Black racism specifically. Since December 2018, staff have taken some modest but important first steps, with their main focus on seeking Council support through the 2020 budget for funds to support work with Black and African diaspora communities on anti-Black racism, which Council approved in December 2019.

While the main coordinated initiative around Anti-Black racism was waiting for the 2020 budget approval and allocation, in 2019 staff initiated and continued several pieces of work, recognizing that work with the community must set the stage for anticipated future efforts:

- In 2019 and early 2020, the City's Arts, Culture and Community Service (ACCS) department piloted anti-Black racism and white privilege awareness training with a group of leadership staff from ACCS and our Planning, Urban Design and Sustainability department to name and address the realities and consequences of individual and institutional racism. Analysis on further roll-out has been paused due to COVID, but will be reviewed as a part of the continuing work to address anti-Black racism and also as part of the implementation of the Equity Framework.
- As part of the Healthy City Scholar's program, the City's Social Policy Department engaged a UBC student to do some research and analysis on anti-Black racism in Vancouver, resulting in the report: Addressing Anti-Black Racism in Vancouver: <https://sustain.ubc.ca/about/resources/towards-healthy-city-addressing-anti-black-racism-vancouver>. This paper will influence staff's work moving forward.
- Work on Hogan's Alley remains a key action to address the historic erasure and displacement of the Black community in Vancouver. Work with Hogan's Alley Society (HAS) and the Black and African diaspora communities on Hogan's Alley has been persistent, although not as rapid as the community had hoped for and/or expected. Staff met with some community members in January to hear feedback on City work and approaches to Hogan's Alley and had been seeking to set up a meeting with Hogan's Alley Society to discuss a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and next steps when COVID-19 arose and all attention turned to pandemic response. We recognize that the length of time and lack of clarity around the challenges of the North East False Creek (NEFC) development process has been difficult for the community and has resulted in a loss of confidence and trust in the City's intentions. Staff are committed to working with HAS - and with the broader community - to advance the vision for redress set out in the NEFC Plan. Now that staff are able to focus again on regular operations, this work has been identified as high importance and we will reach out to HAS in the very near future to discuss next steps and an MOU.
- The City, in partnership with the Province, also recently organized the Day of Action Against Racism campaign, issued a note to all staff about Black Out Tuesday and paused all our social media channels on Black Out Tuesday to give space for Black voices, and posted our statement regarding Black Lives Matter broadly on social media. While we recognize that public statements

are not enough – more action is needed – we do want to note that we see public declarations and campaigns as important. They represent stated positions, intentions, and support and pave the way for deliberate and intentional action on a matter. We know that until we speak, our beliefs and intentions are not known.

- Staff will be re-engaging on the planned anti-Black racism program for 2020, recognizing that COVID response delayed our start by a couple of months.
- Despite the significant financial challenges facing the City and the need to delay many City projects, City Council recently directed staff to prioritize work on anti-racism ahead of the originally planned 2021 timeline. Funding has been reallocated to advance these efforts in 2020 and staff in ACCS are taking next steps to accelerate this work, with more information to follow shortly.
- City Council recently passed the motion “Standing Up to the Rise in Anti-Indigenous, Anti-Black, and Anti-People of Colour - including Anti-Asian - Racism and Hate Crimes,” which further provides direction to staff to accelerate work on anti-racism locally and to advocate to senior levels of government for greater investment in and legislative action related to racism and hate crimes.

We will very soon be sharing more information on additional steps we plan to take related to anti-racism more broadly, steps on which we hope you will work with us. We anticipate that this information will be shared through our communications team and various community distribution lists before the end of the week and hope to work with the many engaged community groups that make up the vibrant Black and African diaspora communities here in Vancouver.

Finally, I affirm to every Vancouver resident and to all City of Vancouver staff that as a City we condemn all acts of hate including hate speech and racialized violence. We condemn racism and will continue working to eliminate it in all its forms in our city.

Yours truly,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Sadhu A. Johnston". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending from the end of the name.

Sadhu A. Johnston
City Manager

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cc: