

June 3, 2024

Dear Mayor Guthrie and Council,

RE: Committee of the Whole Meeting, Agenda item #8.1 – Drill Hall Responses to Expressions of Interest and Planned Future Use – 2024-261

My name is Stephanie Bryenton and I am writing to you today with lenses informed by being a wife to an incredibly talented artist and one of Guelph's community leaders in the arts, as well as an Indigenous community member. Some of you may recall me from the truth and reconciliation council orientation I did during my time as the City of Guelph's Intergovernmental Advisor, specializing in Indigenous Relations from September 2022 to February 2023. I resigned from my position due to the City's lack of commitment to truth and reconciliation, and the lack of leadership support on my ability as staff to act on Indigenous community's call for action from this municipal government.

Today, I would like to outline some of the concerns I have regarding not just the proposal the Guelph's Centre for the Visual Arts (GCVA) is advocating for, but also the City's continued ignorance of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's 94 Calls to Action, and the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People (UNDRIP).

As I hope you are aware, on May 1, 2024, Bill C-29, which provides for the establishment of the National Council for Reconciliation (the Council), received Royal Assent and officially became Canadian law. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada Calls to Action are no longer an option to be ignored, and the City needs to acknowledge the call upon federal, provincial, territorial and municipal governments to repudiate concepts used to justify European sovereignty over Indigenous peoples and lands, such as the Doctrine of Discovery, and to reform those laws, governmental policies, and litigation strategies that continue to rely on such concepts as listed in call to action #47. The City also needs to acknowledge the business and reconciliation call #92 as follows: We call upon the corporate sector in Canada to adopt the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as a reconciliation framework and to apply its principles, norms, and standards to corporate policy and core operational activities involving Indigenous peoples and their lands and resources. This would include, but not be limited to, the following:

- i. Commit to meaningful consultation, building respectful relationships, and obtaining the free, prior, and informed consent of Indigenous peoples before proceeding with economic development projects.
- ii. Ensure that Aboriginal peoples have equitable access to jobs, training, and education opportunities in the corporate sector, and that Aboriginal communities gain long-term sustainable benefits from economic development projects.
- iii. Provide education for management and staff on the history of Aboriginal peoples, including the history and legacy of residential schools, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Treaties and Aboriginal rights, Indigenous law, and Aboriginal–Crown relations. This will require skills-based training in intercultural competency, conflict resolution, human rights, and anti-racism.

Regardless of any proposals coming forward for the Drill Hall, the City of Guelph has continued to ignore the urban Indigenous voices of the community it serves. During my time as City staff, I shared space with multiple Indigenous community members, Elders, knowledge keepers and fire keepers who all had the same ask. Urban Indigenous community members wanted access to land, they wanted an Indigenous community hub and a place to gather, and at the very least, most wanted to be included and engaged with by City staff when making decisions in our community. The Urban Indigenous community in this city has been ignored for too long, and should the City have land they are looking to support a community group in, the calls to action above call on the City to prioritize the Indigenous community indefinitely.

The process, policies and procedures in which the City conducts business is not to the benefit of Indigenous community, but rather those with many privileges in the community such as the Chair of the GCVA, Mike Salisbury. As a former City councillor, upon my first interaction with Mr. Salisbury, he was very confident in his ability to manipulate the City to do what he was asking in the creation of GCVA. To my knowledge, Mr. Salisbury has had the privilege of a successful career as a business owner, councillor, and now a second career in the arts. Mr. Salisbury knows the system well; a system built to benefit and give power to him and folks alike.

This privilege affords GCVA to propose concepts such as “Why Guelph would benefit from a Centre for Visual Arts: Play.” I think a lot of our community would love the privilege to think about play, engage in play, but are simply doing what they can to survive being so marginalized in every colonial system built to kill Indigenous people. In 2021, the County of Guelph-Wellington conducted the “Everyone Counts” survey, where 23% of respondents identified as Indigenous and are over-represented in the survey results. 43% identified as unsheltered, 19% identified as emergency sheltered and 38% identified temporarily sheltered. Everyday there are people dying on the streets, struggling with housing, addiction, poverty, and acquiring basic human rights and needs. These are some of the many reasons the urban Indigenous community has been advocating for an Indigenous community hub; a place to gather, heal, navigate the way to overcome intergenerational trauma of residential schools, reclaim traditional ceremonies and teachings, and support one another in navigating the systems that continue to oppress us.

As a wife and supporter of the arts community in Guelph, GCVA is not for the community, but rather seeking to gain power over the arts community. Everything they have done to date has been to manipulate their position, including misrepresenting the support they have for their proposal. GCVA lists the comments on social media that have been supportive, but have erased and blocked anyone on social media who has raised anything negative, speaking from personal experience as they have done this to me. During the first meeting my wife had with Mr. Salisbury, I asked him directly if his proposed concept was looking to put my wife out of business. Mr. Salisbury responded that it would, but he was looking for my wife to do what she is doing in the community now, but under his roof and by abandoning her artist collective. To relieve worry, Mr. Salisbury offered my wife a seat on the board, which my wife accepted and resigned from a few months later. It became clear to my wife that GCVA was not looking to collaborate, but overtake the arts sector in Guelph to be what they want it to be, as retired second career artists with the privilege and power to accomplish their goals.

In addition to the many things GCVA does not have, expertise in the art sector is also one of them. My wife’s experience on the board was extractive in nature, she was expected to hand over business plans, financials and other details that would help their proposal. My wife entered the

Guelph arts community during her undergraduate degree at Guelph, where she completed a Bachelor of Arts in Studio Art. After graduation, the studio she rented space from was facing deficits not unlike other businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic, and was announcing its closure. Knowing how hard it is for artists to find space in Guelph, my wife made the courageous decision to take over the studio and continue to offer collective arts space in downtown Guelph.

Although my wife's business is sole proprietorship, she functions like a not-for-profit space. On her 2023 taxes, my wife's income was in the negative as a concrete example of her commitment to this community and offering artist space that doesn't make a profit, but rather covers the baseline of studio expenses to keep the artist space going. Despite applying for multiple government grants and funding, the City included, my wife has never received a dime of help from anyone to help her sustain the art space she holds and protects. Throughout the battle of keeping the space alive, my wife will be graduating from her Master of Fine Arts degree at York University in a few weeks. Needless to say, my wife holds the education and lived experience in community art spaces that qualifies her as an expert in her field. Not one member of the GCVA board can say the same.

So with this information I recommend the City consider the following options:

1. If council directs staff to sell the Drill Hall as recommended, the City's treaty partners, Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation and Six Nations of the Grand River should be involved in this decision and be compensated for the sale of the land.
2. If council rejects the sale of the Drill Hall, urban Indigenous communities should be engaged and consulted as for what community space and an Indigenous hub could look like in the community. To my knowledge, Indigenous organizations in Kitchener have reached out to City staff in the past with clear financial asks to bring an Indigenous healing hub to Guelph that have never been actioned. The Region of Waterloo and municipalities do their part in funding Indigenous organizations in their community, which is why the region is home to over 30 Indigenous organizations.

Miigwetch and signed,

Stephanie Bryenton

Resources:

[Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action](#)

[United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#)

[Guelph-Wellington 2021 everyone counts - Indigenous Population Results](#)