

June 18 2020

Dear Regional Chair and Councillors:

A Better Niagara's Board was deeply concerned by West Lincoln Mayor Dave Bylsma's recent comments in his radio interview.

As we said in our recent Facebook post about the matter:

Now is not the time for tone-deaf leadership.

People can't pretend that the legacies of slavery, racism, colonialism, residential schools and homophobia aren't still weaving their insidious threads through our society.

In recent weeks, thousands of Niagara's citizens joined people from across the globe to say it is time to put an end to the forces that keep those toxic legacies in place.

Now is the time for people who have enjoyed privilege to listen to those who have not, to be open and self-reflective and to ask themselves what they can do to foster a more just society.

Leaders can't lead solely from their own lived experience. They have to be able to put themselves in another's shoes, to challenge their assumptions and be willing to learn from the people they serve.

Now more than ever, leaders need empathy guided by wisdom.

Now more than ever, leaders need to embody that or get out of the way.

While we appreciate Chair Bradley's comments to CKTB describing a few steps that have been taken to be inclusive and, acknowledging that there is more work to be done, we believe that more action is called for.

We would like Council to pass a motion, along the lines of the one issued recently by the Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority¹, affirming that the Region is committed to living up to the sign outside the Regional building: Region of Niagara: Everyone Welcome.

¹ The NPCA recognizes that diversity is a source of strength and believes there should be zero tolerance towards racism, prejudice and discrimination within our organization, Conservation Areas, and watershed community as a whole.

Our success in meeting our mandate and mission is dependent upon working in collaboration with our partners in conservation. We are committed to ensuring every individual in the NPCA watershed, regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, or disability has the opportunity to connect with nature and conservation, to take action towards protecting water and biodiversity, while working in collaboration towards sustainable communities in ways that are appropriate and meaningful to them.

Second, we would like the Region to re-evaluate the training provided to Regional Councillors to ensure that it includes a discussion of anti-racism, unconscious bias and what real inclusivity means and looks like in action.

Third, we ask that Mayor Bylsma be excluded from acting as the Region's representative in any external capacity. We are not asking for his exclusion from conferences, community events, etc. We are simply asking that he not be allowed to be the Region's representative.

And finally, we ask you to take a good look around your Council and leadership tables. Do those positions of power reflect the diversity of our Region? How can we change that? What can you do, collectively and as individuals, to make sure everyone is really welcomed, everyone's voice is truly heard, every one of our citizens are not only "tolerated" but valued for the unique gifts and experiences they bring to our community.

We look forward to your response.

Ed Smith
Director, A Better Niagara

Liz Benneian
Director, A Better Niagara

Haley Bateman
Director, A Better Niagara

Dennis Edell
Director, A Better Niagara