

Below is the full content of the email sent on Friday afternoon, July 24, 2020

From: Whatcom Human Rights Task Force

Email subject: Sharing our concerns about the upcoming Listening Sessions

An open letter to Hon. Seth Fleetwood, Mayor of Bellingham and Hon. Satpal Sidhu, Whatcom County Executive:

There is a lot of work to be done in Whatcom County when it comes to issues of social and racial justice. Since the murder of George Floyd on May 25th there have been marches, rallies, and protests across Whatcom County. Countless community members and organizations put out statements demanding acknowledgement of white supremacy in our institutions, reallocating a percentage of the police budget to social services and housing, abolishing prisons, ending encampment sweeps, investing in BIPOC communities, and countless other reforms inspired by this second wave of Black Lives Matter.

Bellingham Mayor Seth Fleetwood has proposed a series of listening sessions as a beginning step in identifying how we dismantle structural racism, but the plan itself is soaked in the very thing it wishes to conquer. According to the COB press release, the sessions are sponsored by a long list of government entities, with support by "various community partners" including several POC-led organizations. However, at least two of the POC-led organizations listed in the press release have not, in fact, confirmed their support for the proposed format as of this writing. And, like the Whatcom Human Rights Task Force board, they communicated some reservations with the way it has been rolled out.

COB is asking local BIPOC-led groups to do a lot of work here with zero compensation. Those in power are all being paid while they work to fix harms done to BIPOC people locally; the local BIPOC-led organizations they're reaching-out to for help/cover/legitimacy, having already received the harms, are being asked to provide their time, service and expertise--not to mention costs to personal wellness and safety--for zero compensation.

By the time the announcement hit the Herald on Wednesday, July 22nd, no community partners were mentioned. Only government entities and "others" were listed as partners. Organizational leaders were not invited to plan the sessions in conversation with Mayor Fleetwood together. This increases the likelihood that the traditional power structure of government control and oversight would be maintained in the resulting sessions.

How can there be an honest and productive conversation when: 1. the conversation is being controlled by those holding power; and 2. there is a lack of transparency and honesty when promoting these sessions. How can we be sure BIPOC voices will be prioritized without being tokenized?

If these conversations truly aim at dismantling systemic racism and white supremacy, then a paradigm shift must exist from the very beginning, by bringing potential supporters to plan for a series of listening sessions together, providing accessibility (ie internet access, devices, interpreters, closed captions) and protecting the confidentiality, safety and dignity of those being asked to speak. The City of Bellingham and Whatcom County as a whole must acknowledge that rushing through this part of the process reinforces the very things these sessions are designed to address. Bellingham is 85% white because of racist policies employed since white settler colonialists first stole this land from the Coast Salish Peoples 250 years ago. For these listening sessions to do more than provide the appearance that those in power are "doing something", they must lead to commitments from all levels of government to:

- center and amplify Indigenous, Black and Brown voices;
- de-center voices that hold exclusionary and dominant practices in place;
- reallocate funds from weaponized policing to programs and services that align community safety with individual needs;
- prioritize safe, stable, secure housing and an end to sweeps;
- highlight the disproportionate demographics within our jail compared to that of our county's population;
- support removal of police from schools.

Respectfully,

The Board of the Whatcom Human Rights Task Force
Ane Berrett, Damani Johnson, David Crook, Eve Smason-Marcus, Geneva Blake, Julie Mauermann, Larry Estrada

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