

MLA butts with mayor over benches

Julie Green does not agree with city staff's decision; thinks problems with downtown seating were exaggerated

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The MLA for Yellowknife Centre says that she does not see eye-to-eye with the mayor when it comes to park benches in the city's downtown core.



Paul Tsetta, left, Terry Mandeville and Billy King relax on the bench on 50 Street near Franklin Avenue on Monday. The bench was removed by city staff last month and then ordered returned by city council a week later. - John McFadden/NNSL photo

Julie Green said she has spoken to Mark Heyck about the city's removal of a bench on 50 Street near Franklin Avenue last month to express she did not think the move was a productive approach to dealing with homelessness and public drunkenness downtown.

The bench was removed by city staff last month and replaced in about a week, when council voted to instruct city administration to return it. Councillors in favour argued its removal worked against the goal of revitalizing downtown.

Heyck and Coun. Steve Payne were the only two who voted against returning the bench. Heyck made the relatively rare move of stepping down from his position to preside over council meetings so he could vote on the issue.

To do so, deputy mayor Adrian Bell temporarily presided over council, nulling his vote, which would have been to return the benches. Heyck stated in an e-mail to Yellowknifer Tuesday he does not regret his vote.

"He had his reasons for doing it which involved the city staff and the amount of maintenance that they were doing around that bench," Green said.

"I told him I didn't think that was the right approach. I'm not going to tell you that he agreed with me. But he listened respectfully and that's really all I can expect."

Administration explained to councillors last month the bench was removed because of issues of cleanliness and abuse of staff maintaining the seating space. City of Yellowknife facilities manager Dave Hurley said city staff often had to clean broken bottles and human waste away from the area.

Green said she is skeptical about the complaint.

"I can't imagine that a single park bench monopolizes such a huge amount of time in the city's maintenance department that they can't keep up with the demands of it. That seems like an overstatement," Green said. "If the bench was that dirty I would have expected to have noticed that myself. I haven't noticed it."

Green pointed out that cleaning the public washrooms at Somba K'e Civic Plaza is also likely unpleasant but somebody does it.

She went on say the removal of park benches from in front of the post office two years ago had no effect on who hangs out downtown.

"People continued to sit on the wall in front of the post office and it's not just intoxicated people. If it's a nice day there are all kinds of people sit there," Green said.

"If we want our downtown to be livable and vibrant, taking steps to ensure that happens by making it comfortable - whether it's with park benches or public washrooms."

Green said Yellowknife is not the only city where intoxicated people need a place to sit and a place to use the bathroom.

Payne said he has no regrets in voting to support city staff in removing the bench.

"I've had people come up to me, I can't even tell you how many times, who have said they are happy with the way I voted on that," Payne said. "I don't think that we need to be micromanaging everything in the city. I think there was a decision made based on the information that he had at the time and I think Mr. Hurley thought that he had made the proper decision."

Payne said the issue was not just the filth around the bench but the catcalls of women and other verbal abuse from the bench. However, he agrees the issues that plague downtown Yellowknife are bigger than just one park bench.

"The park bench has become a symbol now. We have a lot of problems downtown and we are slowly working on them. Nobody has the answers right now, including myself," Payne said.

"Whether people want to believe it or not, it is not the city's mandate. It's a territorial and federal government job to fix homelessness, to fix addictions problems. We only have an \$80-million budget per year. We have a lot more to do with our money than fix problems downtown."