

My name is Tyeastia Green and I am the Director of Racial Equity, Inclusion and Belonging for the city of Burlington. I have prepared a written statement regarding the mural on Church Street.

I understand that this mural has been a point of contention for some time. After my position was announced, I received emails asking what my position was on a mural that even til this day I haven't seen in person. I have seen pictures of it. My job here at the city of Burlington is to call out instances of racism, covert and overt. My job here, is to break down longstanding institutions of racism – what that means at a high level, is to change the way we do business. To ensure that race will not be a determining factor in outcomes. I understand that this is a lofty goal, but I am up to the task.

We are in a pandemic right now that is disproportionately affecting BIPOC communities. COVID has put a bright spotlight on the racialized disparities that have been here for centuries. Disparities with basic needs like food, shelter, health, and income to name a few. My priority has always been to keep the spotlight on those disparities and to work with urgency to repair them. Does this mural fall into those priorities of repairing disparities? No. Is this mural racist? Absolutely. My position is that the mural should come down because as a government entity and municipality we should not uphold racist idealism on city property. We have to make it clear that white supremacy culture as an institution will not be tolerated or allowed here, and we have to follow that up with action.

However, this isn't a huge priority for the black and brown communities even though they believe it to be offensive. Most of the people who have made this a priority are white community members. Bringing this mural down is an easy way to say, look at what we did to dismantle racism. But it is not going far enough in dismantling racism. This mural is a symbol of racism. It is a symbol as offensive as the swastika. Covering up that swastika or removing it does not dismantle racism. It puts a cover over offensive idealism and symbolism. There's still so much real work to be done.

With that said, here are my ideas for council to consider as they prepare to vote on this. I understand that business owners have paid to have their likeness and their businesses displayed on the mural. Paying to have your business on a mural that has been deemed to be racist by the BIPOC communities as well as white community members puts some onus on the business owners to pay for its removal. Most of these businesses have diversity statements on their websites, because of that I'm sure they don't want to be associated with racism in any way. If they truly want the mural to stay because of funds used to be included, perhaps there's a way to fix the mural to be more inclusive, and honest about the citizens and history of Burlington. If not, the mural must come down. And we're back to square one of sharing the onus and costs associated with its removal.

When the mural comes down, regardless if it is now or in 2022, it should not be placed elsewhere within our city. It should be returned to the artist. We cannot have racist idealism on any city wall, building or entity.

If none of these ideas are doable at the moment because of the covid crisis, the mural should be covered up with a tarp that is strong enough and durable enough to withstand extreme temperatures and have other art from the community placed on it.

Bottom line, the mural is offensive and promotes racist idealism. We have three options to consider - fixing the problem by adding a true representation of the community, removal the mural and returning it to the artist or covering until removal is possible.