

To: Burlington Parks Arts & Cultural Committee

From: Bob Kiernan / Downtown Burlington

Date: August 10, 2020

Subject: Action Regarding ELAP Mural Modifications in Leahy Way Before August 31, 2020

A recent press conference in downtown Burlington was covered by local WPTZ and NECN as reported by Jim Thurston which brings back into focus a more “balanced” way of thinking about ELAP. Certain hateful rhetoric has been expressed now for quite some time in our community. There is actually a large percentage of Burlingtonians (and Vermonters state-wide) who see this mural in a mostly favorable light and a benefit to our community. To see the more nuanced view now brought forth by Messrs. Cina and Dieng is most welcome. I live in Ward 3 right next to Representative Cina’s (6-4) district and I have supported his positions on many issues. His statement on camera that “public art is evolving” is an important point of view. In the past he has been at times categorized (along with Councilor Dieng) as taking the extreme view that the mural is hateful and racist. Councilor Dieng’s way of stating now that he feels “misrepresented” and “there is no diversity” reaches out to the community in a more positive way than his previous repeated charges of “racism” and “racist.”

Many Burlingtonians do not agree with the “racism” assessment and see the tearing down of the mural as a distinct form of censorship, but still recognize other points of view. It is also gratifying to see Gina Carrera given an opportunity to share her thoughts in the video report. She was not acknowledged properly when the ELAP mural project was in development over ten years ago. It is welcoming that recently the mural critics have stepped-up to support her. This had not been the case during the eight years that ELAP has been on display. The fact that critics of the mural have never presented (for the same eight years) any viable alternative art to the public about ELAP is unfortunate. The focus has been backward, not forward -- mostly centering on “the mural comes down” instead of on a progressive view of what will improve the issue -- via art.

During these years of criticism no artistic proposal (or any funding) has been publicly brought forth by those opposing the ELAP mural -- a comprehensive proposal to bring “evolved” mural art to Leahy Way and Burlington does not yet exist alongside the hasty energy put towards tearing ELAP down ahead of schedule.

In May, this year, our City Council stated that the Council “finds it in the public interest to remove the mural before August 29, 2022 due to the continuing hurt that the mural is causing members of the community” and asking that the City and the DPW cover or remove the mural to storage. Haste in this issue is not in the public interest at this time. This is mostly an ideological goal that may not be timely during the current economic and health challenges of Covid-19 and the budget shortfall for Burlington. The expense of action about the ELAP mural should, in this stage, be directed at utilizing the mural and/or part of the mural space to support bringing Vermonters and visitors back into downtown and the Marketplace. The workers and small businesses downtown and in the district already suffer extensive economic challenges. Positive action would be welcome by all; not negative and costly construction activity to tear down or cover the ELAP mural with no proposed comprehensive artistic plan firmly in place for Leahy Way.