

Thunder Bay News Watch

Lawyers, media driving wedge between city and Indigenous people: Mayor

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THUNDER BAY – The city's mayor, police and Crime Prevention Council want the public conversation around racism to have sweeter tone.

Mayor Keith Hobbs sounded off following a Crime Prevention Council annual update before city council on Monday.

Hobbs pointed to the Thunder Bay Police Service's handling of the homicide portfolio as evidence of the department's effectiveness, citing arrests have been made in all but one of the city's 24 homicides since 2014.

“We’re still being hammered by the media and high-priced lawyers from Toronto telling us we’re not doing enough,” Hobbs said.

“I’m sick and tired of high-priced lawyers coming in and trying to drive a wedge between us and Indigenous people. It has got to stop. We’re supposed to be working together. Instead of finger-pointing, I challenge those lawyers to come to the table and start working with us.”

On Friday, relations between the police and the Indigenous community made headlines again amid reports the Office of the Independent Police Review Director will hold a conduct review of the police’s investigation into the death of Rainy River First Nations man, Stacey DeBungee.

Police declared DeBungee’s death to be non-criminal a day after his body was discovered in the McIntyre River on Oct. 19, 2015, before a post-mortem was complete.

An investigator the family hired suspected the case might have been a homicide.

A letter the OIPRD issued to DeBungee’s family and community stated following the conduct investigation, it will also conduct a systemic review of the Thunder Bay Police’s handling of similar deaths.

The review would also examine issues raised by the inquiry into the cases of seven Indigenous youth from remote communities who died while attending high school in the city.

In the face of accusations of institutional racism from the Rainy River First Nations’ legal counsel, Thunder Bay Police Service deputy chief Andrew Hay assured the mayor the force is doing everything in its power to build bridges.

“There will be those that want to try to drive wedges between the police, our community and the Indigenous community,” Hay said.

“That’s going to happen but we have to really take the position that any chance we get to have it in the public eye is an opportunity to show we can build relationships; that we can, and will, and are dedicated to working with our Indigenous community to address their issues so in the end, we all live in a city that has justice that’s the same for everybody regardless of race.”

Crime Prevention Council coordinator Lee-Ann Chevrette said racism arises at every table at which she sits.

She praised the city's Respect campaign and a series of facebook videos for raising what she considers positive public attention to racism in the city.

"I'm concerned sometimes about the messaging that goes out and the damage it can do," Chevrette said of media coverage surrounding race.

"When I speak to people in the community, people are very concerned and moving forward, deepening the Respect initiative is a very good way to address and getting the message out. I think it's very complex but I think the anti-racism and Respect initiatives are very committed to helping us address this."