

Thunder Bay council vote on Beyak 'unconscionable,' Indigenous leaders say

Resolution asked Thunder Bay City Council to back calls for Beyak's resignation

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City councillors in Thunder Bay debated asking Senator Lynn Beyak to resign her seat after making comments about the citizenship of Indigenous people, and residential schools. The resolution didn't pass. (Jeff Walters/CBC)

Nishnawbe-Aski Nation (NAN) and Fort William First Nation (FWFN) are calling Thunder Bay City Council's refusal to call for the resignation of a controversial Canadian senator on Monday "unconscionable."

City council was tasked Monday night with voting on a resolution tabled by Northwood Councillor Shelby Ch'ng. The resolution asked council to support the Northwestern Ontario Municipal Association in calling for the resignation of Senator Lynn Beyak over comments Beyak made about Canada's Indigenous population.

Most-recently, Beyak posted a statement on her senate website that called on Indigenous people to trade their, "status card for a Canadian citizenship, with a fair and negotiated payout to each Indigenous man, woman and child in Canada, to settle all the outstanding land claims and treaties, and move forward together just like the leaders already do in Ottawa."

Ch'ng's resolution didn't get enough votes to pass on Monday night; Mayor Keith Hobbs and Couns. Rebecca Johnson, Linda Rydholm, Joe Virdiramo, Brian McKinnon and Trevor Giertuga voted against it.

Excuses 'cowardly,' 'an embarrassment'

On Tuesday, NAN Grand Chief Alvin Fiddler and FWFN Chief Peter Collins issued scathing statements about Monday's vote.

"It is unconscionable that city council failed to support this call for the resignation of Senator Lynn Beyak after her insulting and racist comments," Fiddler said. "Just last month we signed a Statement of Commitment with the City to fight racism and make Thunder Bay a safer, more welcoming place for First Nation people. Council's failure to act is extremely disappointing and goes against the spirit of that commitment."

"Council's failure to act is extremely disappointing." - Alvin Fiddler, Grand Chief of Nishnawbe Aski Nation

Fiddler also said the "excuses made by members of council for their failure to act are cowardly and an embarrassment for Thunder Bay and northwestern Ontario. Reconciliation is meaningless without action, and council missed a significant opportunity to stand with us."

Collins, meanwhile, called Monday's vote a "setback" in the development of positive relationships between the city and FWFN, which is located just south of Thunder Bay.

"The lack of knowledge and understanding demonstrated by some members of city council on these issues is a barrier to the reconciliation we are working so hard to achieve," Collins said in a statement.