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Quite the mess before the party's even started

By RICK BELL, CALGARY SUN

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It's a mad, mad, mad, mad world and madder still when the big jobs are on the line.

Downtown at city hall Monday, "party" is suddenly a four-letter word, aldermen are warned not to give the media (hi, mom) a club to beat on council and Calgary's Chinese community are cast as victims of a double standard.

The mayor uses the word "degrading" as the to-and-fro goes on and a sinking feeling flows over the sensible.

No one even agrees that what they're doing is what they're doing.

At day's end, a majority, including Bronco and Ric McIver, approve up to \$500,000 for a Chinatown centennial "grand celebration," including a party, undetermined "beautification," a Chinatown documentary and "youth engagement," whatever that means.

The organizers will come back with detailed plans for council's approval in two months.

Five vote No. Four of them — Johnny Mar, Druh Farrell, Joe Ceci, Bob Hawkesworth — don't want this extra step, though they vote for the party in the end. The fifth, Diane Colley-Urquhart, votes No because she is against the whole deal. Big Red is the only member of council to vote down the half-million.

She sees this flap over the Chinatown shindig as "needless mishandling" and feels planning should have happened before the centennial year, not in it.

"Why would anyone approve anything when I don't see the plans in front of me? The whole thing is a mess."

Diane is visibly disgusted this centennial is so disorganized since the Chinese are an important community in this city and 100 years of existence is quite something.

She doesn't sound thrilled when others on council go through Chinatown's history, including the head tax, to justify their doling out of the dough with little sign of a plan.

"I don't need a dissertation on Chinese history," says Big Red.

Johnny Mar, who is quite steamed and looks taller, talks about the "history of racism in this country" and then goes on, hot under the collar of his stylish dress shirt.

"This celebration went through the proper committee and is now being asked to jump through additional hoops. I don't think that's correct or fair," he says.

"It's an unusual process and I would have liked to see us stand firm as a council and say we are inclusive and we understand this community is different."

Mar says the council's vote "creates a second tier" and the Chinese are now "subjected" to bringing plans back to council for what the alderman calls a "double vetting."

"That's something we've never done before and I don't know why this community and this celebration is being singled out."

Mar stops short of accusing any aldermen of racism and adds Chinese in Calgary will treat council's latest decision with "a measure of grace and dignity."

McIver is in a barky mood but then he has been in a few people's doghouse with his vote for the \$500,000.

But, even now, there is confusion.

McIver, living in this column with no nickname until we know where his wind is blowing, says he wants things to be more clear and he wants to provide the public with "comfort."

He says aldermen will have a chance to vote on each part of the \$500,000 plan when it comes back to council.

"I get the impression council will be able to say yes or no project by project. Things make sense, say yes. Things don't make sense, say no."

But others on council, such as Ald. Gord Lowe, say they will only look at the "broad elements" of the plan rather than something more microscopic.

"Typically we don't do that," says the alderman, of McIver's interesting interpretation of events.

To end with McIver, he also doesn't want the half-million to come out of the city's rainy-day funds unless ... ah yes ... there's a "compelling reason" to do so.

It is quite the day to behold, well worth the price of admission.

Aldermen make sure they're on record insisting the celebration isn't a party or is only part party. They know what it isn't but don't know what it is.

Ald. Joe Connelly chides them for giving folks like me a club by not calling a spade a spade and then votes for the \$500,000, provided he sees the plans in May.

Speaking of spades, lately, spades have been appearing as anything but spades.

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