

Public school board agrees with Jewish Congress: material was anti-Semitic

BY KATHLEEN GRIFFIN
Staff Writer

Bowing to pressure from the Canadian Jewish Congress, York's public school board has agreed with the group that material distributed by a member of its race relations committee was anti-Semitic and publicly chastised the man Thursday night.

The actions taken at the conference were taken without the knowledge of the board, said York Region District Public School Board chair Bill Crothers, reading from a prepared statement at the board's public meeting.

Had the materials in question been submitted to the board prior to their distribution they would never have been approved. We strongly criticize this action.

"I want to say very clearly and without reservation that this action was antithetical to the principals on which this board has been built," Crothers continued.

"I would like to reaffirm our unwavering commitment to diversity and equity in all aspects of our board's operations and administration."

But Crothers stopped short of saying he would force Abu-Zahra to resign from the race relations advisory committee, something the CJC has demanded, going so far as to threaten to lay a complaint with the Ontario Human Rights Commission.

At a teacher's conference in April, Abu-Zahra distributed copies of a book review and analysis written by M.H. Faruqi on Norman Finkelstein's book "The Holocaust Industry: Reflections on the Exploitation of Jewish Suffering."

Finkelstein asserts the Holocaust is exploited by Jewish organizations for financial gain and political power, a position the CJC and committee chair, Thornhill trustee Alan Shefman, calls overt racism.

Shefman wrote Abu-Zahra demanding he resign, but he

refused. Shefman then tabled a motion at the committee calling for his resignation, but it was voted down. Abu-Zahra responded to Shefman by letter, calling the accusations of racism "groundless."

He said he is against public schools having a special focus on Holocaust education because it excludes other cultural genocides and marginalizes their suffering.

"The belief there is a hierarchy of human suffering is in itself profoundly racist and deeply offensive," he wrote.

"The notion that the suffering of Jewish people should be featured in the school curriculum over that of others is without intrinsic merit from either an educational or human rights perspective."

Abu-Zahra has said the matter is closed and he remains a committee member.

CJC executive director Bernie Farber called the review hate material because it "proposes the

preposterous and vile theory that Jewish power elite are using the Holocaust to promote Jewish causes." He said anyone who would hand it out at a race relations conference doesn't belong on such a committee.

Farber said Crothers' statement goes a long way in addressing the group's concerns.

"Many people, not just our community, were concerned the board was not taking this matter seriously," Farber said, adding he'll meet with Crothers early next week to discuss Abu-Zahra's removal from the committee.

That's still our position, but if the board has an alternate way to resolve this, we'll discuss it," Farber said.

Crothers said he can't speculate on what will be on the table at the meeting, but believes the major issue has been dealt with: That the board was unaware of Abu-Zahra's action, it does not condone it and it has stated that publicly.

"What goes beyond that I don't know," he said.

Many people, not just our community, were concerned the board was not taking this matter seriously.

—Bernie Farber, Canadian Jewish Congress executive director

BOMB SCARE EMPTIES UNIONVILLE SHOPPING PLAZA



STAFF PHOTO/SJOERD WITTEVEN

More than 10 York Regional Police units, with the help of Emergency Response Unit's explosive team, responded to a call of a suspicious package in the parking lot of the shopping plaza at Hwy. 7 and Warden Avenue Wednesday afternoon. A grey suitcase with a red ribbon tied around the handle was lying on the yellow line opposite McDonald's and looked weird, two callers told police. The Emergency Response Unit robot was used to open the suitcase, after officers evacuated stores and closed all plaza entrances. The suitcase was empty and an officer (above) picked it up for disposal. The plaza was closed more than four hours.

Regional abuse program faces layoffs after budget shortfall

BY PATRICK MANGION
Staff Writer

An \$84,000 shortfall at the York Region Abuse Program will mean temporary layoffs for more than half the employees at the Newmarket-based non-profit organization.

Ten of YRAP's 17 staff members will be laid off for eight weeks as of July 16, according to executive director Lynn Huizer.

She said the layoffs were "an absolute last resort."

Board chairperson Donna Leitch said the agency has enough funds, about \$100,000, to keep operating until September, when it is hoped more funding can be secured and staff welcomed back.

Huizer and Leitch were on the hot seat in Newmarket Thursday evening when about 50 people, many employees, volunteers and former board members, crammed into a small boardroom for the organization's annual general meeting.

Emotions ran high at the three-hour meeting, as Leitch and Huizer refuted claims the shortfall was

caused by mismanagement.

"I don't think (the shortfall) could have been prevented," Huizer said.

According to an auditor's report, salaries and benefits are up nearly \$52,000 from last year and a \$40,000 retirement package will be paid out this year.

Huizer said clients of YRAP, which does not typically offer therapy groups during the summer, will not be affected by the layoffs.

Huizer attributed the agency's cash woes to falling short of its fundraising goals, paying costs connected with the maternity leaves of four employees and the unexpected retirement in March of a longtime employee.

Members said they were concerned about the agency's ability to meet its clients' needs.

Huizer said clients of YRAP, which does not typically offer therapy groups during the summer, will not be affected by the layoffs.

In September, the agency plans to reduce the number of support groups to eight from 14, which will allow YRAP to operate more efficiently, according to Huizer.

Wyn Chivers, executive director of the York Region United Way, said she is aware YRAP is facing financial hardships.

"We're considering what action to take," Chivers said.

YRAP receives funding from 11 sources, including the Ministry of Community and Social Services and United Way.

A proposed \$2,000 raise for Huizer only fueled animosity at Thursday's meeting.

Former YRAP member Lynn Pearson said it was "immoral" for Huizer to receive a raise under the circumstances. Huizer said she had requested a salary increase last September, prior to the shortfall.

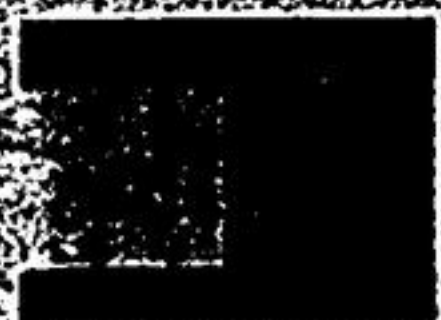
"I don't intend to take the raise when we're in this position," Huizer said.

Kiddie Kobbler

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