Star photo by VINCE FEDOROFF

A MAIDEN EVENT – The Yukon Prize for Visual Arts, the Yukon Arts Foundation, the Yukon Arts Centre, the Whitehorse Chamber of Commerce and the Casino Mining Corp. sponsored the first-ever Business AND Arts After Hours on Nov. 9 at the Yukon Arts Centre. Many Yukon artists attended the event, as seen here. Cole Pauls won the Yukon Prize in Casino's $3,000 Viewers' Choice Award. You can see Pauls' work along with five other Yukon artists in the Yukon Prize 2023 exhibit at the main gallery until Saturday. Kaylyn Baker was the winner of this year's $20,000 Yukon Prize.

Report advocating citizens' assembly passed

By T.S. GIILCK
Star Reporter

After a bit of a crusty debate in the Yukon legislature, a report calling for the establishment of a citizens' assembly to review electoral reform was passed last week.

The governing Liberals and the NDP teamed up to pass the motion approving the report.

That's a reflection of how the Yukon Party voted against the concept at both the committee and legislative levels.

Kate White, the leader of the NDP, was one of the champions of the motion.

"I am also going to be very honest and say that this was an important learning process for me, and had you asked me at the beginning to process my feelings on citizens' assemblies, I would have told you a hard no; I'm not interested," White said.

"I have to say that, over the span of, I believe, nearly 18 months of hearing from people across the territory and from professionals talking about the importance of, for example, the electoral system as it stands and looking Outside, the one thing that became clear for me is that when we make decisions, they probably shouldn't be decided by the people in this room — those who either stand to benefit or those who stand to have a loss from whatever that decision is," she told the legislature.

White, who chaired the committee looking into the feasibility of establishing the citizens' assembly, added the committee met five times.

"Over the course of those meetings, a lot of different things were discussed and a lot of different paths forward were considered."

During the committee's deliberations, White added, members discussed the information they had collected or had been collected by the previous committee — the Special Committee on Electoral Reform.

"There were examples, and we discussed the examples of citizens' assemblies on electoral reform that were held in other parts of Canada," she said.

"It's important to note here that the committee didn't reach a consensus."

The committee's main accomplishment, White said, was coming up with terms of reference for the assembly.

"We believe that the Yukon Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform — or the YCA — should be a representative body of Yukoners that is established to recommend a model of electing members to the Yukon Legislative Assembly. That's the first part.

"Their mandate — that they shall examine electoral systems and that, once they examine those systems, they are to issue a report recommending whether we stay with the current model that we use right now — the first-past-the-post model — or whether another model should be proposed.

"If that's the case, then they can only recommend one model, and they have to tell us the reasons for it," the NDP leader said.

She added that "it's critically important for rural Yukon — anyone outside of Whitehorse — that all decisions made by this assembly not be overweighed by the voices of Whitehorse.

"It's important that this be considered — the balance of rural and urban representation."

Government House Leader John Streicker spoke on behalf of the Liberals.

"The first thing to note is that the report that we're debating today and trying to see if we have concurrence on was a majority report; it wasn't consensus," Streicker said.

The government supports the special committee's report, he added.

"The main points about a citizens' assembly and why we are thinking about them — the number one point is that it's a way to listen to Yukoners. It's a way to engage Yukoners," Streicker said.

"It's a non-partisan way and it's a form of direct democracy."

But a citizens' assembly is not just about electoral reform, he said.

"It's a way to bring together, in this case, Yukoners to talk about issues that Yukoners might care about and get them to come up with ideas. In this case, it's about electoral reform, but I am hopeful that this will be a successful exercise and that we see it as a tool that we can use in the future on other big topics for the Yukon."

Streicker continued, "What we're asking is that the citizens' assembly report back to the legislative assembly — to us, the members here who are elected to represent Yukoners.

" ... The chair of the special committee, it would then come to us to establish — if the citizens' assembly came back and said that they think the Yukon's voting system could be improved and this is the system that they believe would be best for Yukoners, we would then go to a referendum — so, a referendum if needed. As I've said, we didn't reach consensus on that."

Yukon Party Leader Currie Dixon bluntly said his party does not support the creation of a citizens' assembly.

"I think it will probably come as a surprise to no one that the Yukon Party will not be voting in favour of this motion today," he told the House.

"The final report of the Special Committee on the Yukon Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform, which is before us today, is one that we do not support.

"We voted against the creation of this special committee of the legislature to look at the terms of reference for the citizens' assembly," Dixon said.

"We didn't believe — and still don't believe — that it's in the best interest of the territory to have a citizens' assembly, and certainly not one with the structure being outlined in this report."

As a general comment, Dixon added, "we remain somewhat skeptical of the overarching trend toward attempts at electoral reform that we've seen since the 2021 election.

"The general reason for our opposition is simply that we feel that Yukoners want its representatives to focus on issues that matter to them.

"We consistently hear from Yukoners that they are concerned about a number of things. They are concerned about the cost of living; they are concerned about our education system; they are concerned about housing; they are concerned about their lack of access to health care and family doctors; and they are concerned about a whole range of other issues that are facing the territory right now."

In the course of his time in the House, since 2021, Dixon said, "I have never once knocked on a door in my riding and had someone say that what we really needed was a citizens' assembly.

"I know there are some Yukoners out there who do feel strongly about electoral reform ... but my view is that, for the bulk of Yukoners, there are more pressing concerns than this today."

Dixon also cited a number of problems with the terms of reference, as they have been articulated by this report.

"The first line in the terms of reference is — and I quote: 'The Yukon Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform … shall be a representative body of Yukoners established to recommend a model for electing members of the Yukon Legislative Assembly.'

"I don't think that this citizens' assembly will be that at all," said the Yukon Party leader.

" In fact, it will be representative of 1,793 Yukoners. That is the number of eligible Yukoners who are able to sit on this committee, based on their self-selection in a public consultation that occurred between January and March of this year," Dixon said.

"I don't believe it was ever communicated to Yukoners adequately that was their one opportunity to say yes or no to participate in the citizens' assembly. I think the intent of that survey was to seek Yukoners' feedback on the creation of a citizens' assembly.

'I don't believe it was ever properly communicated that was the only opportunity they would have to put their hand up and participate on a citizens' assembly."

By limiting the pool to these 1,793 Yukoners, "who have — without even realizing this was their only opportunity to put their hand up, will limit the pool available to this citizens' assembly," Dixon said.