

Tuesday August 29, 2023

Dear Mayor Morgan and Members of City Council,

By now the City has received extensive feedback on the fireworks debate. The Public Participation Meeting saw a great showing of support for both Option A and Option B. I want to begin by acknowledging the patience and commitment to democracy you demonstrated throughout this process. Civic engagement is an ongoing challenge, and so I commend you (especially Councillor Pelosa) for successfully creating a safe, welcoming space for members of the public to express their views.

I am writing to share my observations of the Public Participation Meeting on the Fireworks By-law. In a [previous submission](#) made through the Environmental Stewardship and Action Community Advisory Committee, I gave feedback focussing on environmental, climate change and specifically fire risks associated with this decision, as well as the importance of adjusting by-laws to facilitate overall changes in human behaviour. This personal submission to Council focuses on cultural and community aspects.

Notably, many people who contributed to the By-law's review referenced the importance of fireworks to Diwali (Deepawali) celebration. **I am concerned Council has thus far heard from only a highly vocal, organized minority within the Diwali community who are attached to a specific way of enacting their tradition.** Are their views truly representative of Londoners who celebrate Diwali, or did the Public Participation Meeting receive a skewed account? Within any cultural group, you will find people of different political stripes, who honour traditions in varying ways. Yet, I imagine differences of opinion within a community may not come to light in a forum as exposed as a Public Participation Meeting.

I do not celebrate Diwali myself, but I am generally familiar with how it is celebrated in the community, and I closely followed the remarks given during the Public Participation Meeting. I found the discourse surrounding fireworks on Diwali to be concerning in three respects:

- 1. Many who spoke about fireworks and Diwali in favor of Option A seem to misunderstand the Fireworks By-law.** The Hindu Legacy Group in London indicated that most Diwali firework displays use sparklers and fountain firework devices. These popular, relatively safe, and quiet alternatives to consumer fireworks are beyond the scope of the by-law. Remarks heard during the Public Participation Meeting showed that some people who were in support of Option A were not aware of the distinction (e.g., believing the lower-impact alternatives would become prohibited under Option B) and at no point was this clarified. Therefore, an unknown proportion of submissions may have been based on incomplete facts. Councillors who have apparently been persuaded by the volume of feedback in favour of Option A should consider there is some confusion in the community about the scope of the by-law.
- 2. It was incorrectly asserted that access to consumer fireworks is a *religious right*. More accurately, use of fireworks or any consumer good is a *cultural choice* that communities make.** To be clear, I am not disputing the religious and spiritual significance of Diwali itself. I am suggesting that unfairly misrepresenting the fireworks tradition as religion reinforces a certain perspective by calling into question the City infringing on religious freedom. Diwali is an ancient festival that is honoured by diverse traditions throughout the world. There is no mention of fireworks specifically in any related religious texts. Fireworks symbolize elements of the holiday such as light and connection with ancestors and have thus for many years been associated with Diwali by a subset of people who celebrate. Yet, I would ask: does the symbolism of fireworks justify excessive personal use of consumer fireworks as we have seen in London, any more than excessive gifts and waste can be justified in Christmas celebrations by other religious communities? (gifts symbolize tributes made to Jesus by the Three Wise Men). My point is, cultural practices evolve when they have new reasons to, such as a ban on Diwali fireworks enacted by the government of New Delhi, India considering environmental impacts, and where there are acceptable, less harmful alternatives like sparklers, lamps, candles, torches, or permitted displays.

3. The religious implications of harms caused by fireworks on Diwali are unclear. As Council has already heard, in the Hindu tradition Diwali symbolizes “*victory of light over darkness, good over evil, and knowledge over ignorance.*” Indian religions including Hinduism, Buddhism and Sikhism also follow the principle of *Ahimsa* or ‘nonviolence’ – an Eastern philosophy that promotes *respect for all living things and the avoidance of violence*. Given the knowledge shared with Council about the harms firework inflict on animals, the environment, and fellow human beings, how can these contradictory religious elements be reconciled in the community? What is the true essence of Diwali, if the people celebrating cannot justify the disharmony caused by their actions? I did not find answers to this at the Public Participation Meeting or in the submissions. I recommend the City clarifies the religious significance of consumer fireworks through further discussion with local subject experts as well as the Diversity, Inclusion and Anti-Oppression Advisory Committee.

How will Council handle requests to further expand dates when consumer fireworks are allowed, to fairly accommodate other religious and cultural groups? How do you evaluate the necessity of consumer fireworks for religious or cultural expression? If the justification to permit consumer fireworks on more days is simply a matter of proponents showing up at City Hall to speak in favor, the current treatment of Diwali could set a precedent, not only for fireworks but how other by-laws are regarded.

Council should enact policies that create conditions for cultural diversity to flourish, so various groups can carry out their traditions in communal spaces and neighbourhoods. However, it is imperative that the people practicing those traditions (particularly ones that affect others) recognize the need for flexibility.

Compromises allow different groups and species, each with their own priorities and needs, to coexist peacefully in London. Celebrations like Diwali can be made inclusive as well as respectful of others who may not wish to partake. Could the City explore other ways to promote Diwali, such as hosting an annual permitted display that is open to the entire community?

I appreciate that this conversation about fireworks has dragged on for a long time and occupied significant public resources, and members of Council are probably feeling ready to be done with this file. However, I see critical gaps in information about the long-term implementation of Option A, and I think the present ambiguity could lead to downstream conflicts for the City and in the community. Remaining questions should be addressed before the City commits to a specific course for updating the By-law.

I encourage Council to defer its decision about the Fireworks By-law until more information can be provided to outline why and how consumer fireworks are to be allowed for Diwali and other religious or cultural celebrations. Short of this step, I believe that in time Council will find itself facing requests for other allowances, without a framework to ensure future decisions are consistent and will not lead to adverse effects.

Regards,

Brendon Samuels
Resident of Ward 4