

Dear Dr. Davalos,

We acknowledge receipt of your email dated March 22, 2024, which was sent to one of our commissioners, Dr. Jean Toner, about an incident (before??) a City Council meeting in March.

The Commission of Diversity Awareness' (CODA's) mission is "to foster support, respect, awareness and appreciation of diversity among all citizens of Flagstaff," and through this mission, we will seek to acknowledge, advise, and recommend, accordingly.

Although our Commission did not experience the said incident firsthand; based on the reported information, it is unclear the intention of the actions at Councilmember Sweet's birthday celebration during the meeting.

According to Raypole 2020, cultural influences abound in the food we eat, the music listened to, even the clothing worn or celebration decor. Sharing culture is generally a positive gesture and may not be done to intentionally disrespect an individual or a community.

It appears acceptable for Councilwoman Sweet to share parts of the Hawaiian culture she was raised with, and spread information about her beliefs, history, and way of life while others gained the opportunity to learn more about another culture. This exchange can lead to a better understanding or and appreciation for different perspectives and traditions. However, appreciating another culture and appropriating aspects of that culture are two different things, and may be confusing where one ends and the other begins. Cultural appropriation occurs when members of one culture adopt specific aspects of a different culture without consent. On the other hand, cultural appreciation involves a desire for knowledge and deeper understanding of a culture (Raypole 2020).

When someone wants to appreciate a culture, one must offer respect to members of that culture and their traditions by participating only when invited to do so. CODA's understanding of the incident is that Councilwoman Sweet invited other councilmembers to join her in her birthday celebration, using a custom her stepfather (who was of Hawaiian heritage) practiced with her, while she was growing up.

At the time of writing, CODA's commissioners are unsure if your concern was already addressed by the City Council. If not, this letter is written in good faith to acknowledge the perceived behavior, and open future dialogue to clarify assumptions and communicate the impact on individuals, communities, and their allies.

CODA's commissioners also note that the choosing and wearing Hawaiian Leis and Haku Crowns to celebrate one's birthday and ignoring any important cultural context behind those elements (not just specific aspects that look pretty), is a misuse of the cultural elements, if occurred. There must be an interest in all elements of the culture. More importantly, one must ask permission and give credit to the creator of the source. In other words, seek to understand people of that culture, as well as the culture itself, more completely instead of contributing to stereotypes (Raypole, 2021).

We wish to reiterate that as none of our commissioners were present during the reported incident, it is difficult for us to grasp the intention of the councilmembers.

We wish to thank you for bringing this issue to our attention as CODA will do our due diligence to educate, discuss, and foster awareness which involve learning and sharing with permission, to deter exploiting other cultures and reinforcing stereotypes.

Please let me know if you wish to discuss further by replying to this letter.

Yours respectfully,
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cc: Councilwoman Khara House, CODA's City Council Liaison

Reference:

Raypole, C., 2020. Healthline "There's a Big Difference Between Cultural Appreciation and Appropriation - Here's Why It Matters" <https://www.healthline.com/health/cultural-appreciation>

Raypole, C., 2021. Healthline "How to Recognize Cultural Appropriation — and What to Do Next" <https://www.healthline.com/health/cultural-appreciation>

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