

Calls to nix mandatory vaccines for municipal staff rejected by Council

Efforts by Councillor John Gallo to have the Town backpedal its decision to require all municipal employees, volunteers and co-op students to show proof of vaccination this month were rejected by Council on a vote of 4 ? 3.

Last week, Councillor Gallo put forward a motion to give staff the option of undergoing frequent rapid antigen testing rather than requiring individuals to prove their vaccination status.

This, he argued, would give those working at Town Hall protection against COVID-19 while also maintaining their privacy.

?To me, the current policy gives two options: get double vaccinated or potentially lose your job,? said Councillor Gallo, citing other government bodies that have offered the rapid test option. ?That, to me, is not the proper solution when there are other solutions that can continue to maintain the health and safety of the individuals.?

The Town announced its vaccination policy at the end of August with a statement from Mayor Tom Mrakas. The decision, he said, was made at the time by CAO Doug Nadorozny and when Councillor Gallo's motion was on the table last week the Mayor defended Mr. Nadorozny's position while stating ?politicizing? the pandemic ?serves no one.?

?We get through this by working together towards a common cause,? said Mayor Mrakas. ?As Mayor, my job from Day 1 has been to rely on the advice of the Medical Officer of Health to protect the health and the welfare of everyone in our community.

?I recognize the necessity of extraordinary steps provincial and municipal leaders have taken to protect our residents, staff and business owners from the highly contagious Delta variant, but with respect to the motion on the floor, I will not be supporting it. I cannot support the motion on the floor as it is contrary to the advice of our Medical Officer of Health and puts the health and safety of our community at risk.?

IN SUPPORT OF RAPID TESTING

Councillor Gallo wasn't the only lawmaker in favour of his motion. He was supported as well by Councillors Rachel Gilliland and Wendy Gaertner.

In backing the motion, Councillor Gilliland, who said she is double vaccinated, put herself in the shoes of others who may not be able to get the vaccine whether it is due to a medical issue, a religious reason, or simply uncertainty.

?I encourage everybody to get vaccinated, I absolutely agree with the Medical Health Officer that [this] is the best way to fight this, but for somebody to feel scared and they may risk losing their livelihood, their jobs, their security, everything, and feeling like they don't have any other choice whatsoever ? I just can't sit here and say I don't support what Councillor Gallo is putting forward today,? she said.

?I don't want to be put in that position where I think someone's livelihood is at risk based on having a little bit of time to have this option that is out there. Why can we not at least make our people, the small percentage of people, feel like they have that choice. Get vaccinated, I agree, but I do believe there should be some sort of option to allow them to go through the education process, allow them to go through to understanding where they need to be in order to get that vaccination, and take it from there.

?We are getting there [with vaccination rates] and I am sure it is going to get higher, but let's not put people's livelihoods [at risk] and give them more anxiety. I don't want to see suicides and depression?there's enough stress in the family already. I don't think they are all being selfish and nobody should be pinned together [that] they are all anti-vaxxers because they are not, the ones who say they just want to take some time. Don't lump them all together.?

Similarly, Councillor Gaertner's support of the motion came from the standpoint of protecting the jobs of staff.

"I am not comfortable knowing that we could have loyal employees lose their employment because of this," she said. "I understand all the arguments everyone has made and frankly everyone is right - no matter what side you stand, there is right on all sides."

Councillor Gallo concluded his argument on a similar wavelength, saying he respected everyone's positions.

"I don't believe anyone at this table wants to put any employee or the public at harm," he said. "If you're against what I am proposing, I don't think you want to do that, and I don't think you think I want to put anyone at harm either."

"I saw emails [throughout the pandemic commending our staff] for coming out to work, doing their jobs, putting themselves in harm's way. For those employees now who want to maintain their privacy and do whatever they want with their medical treatments, now we're saying, "Sorry, you're going to lose your job. I can't sit back and watch that. Voting against this is telling those employees that we're mandating double vaccinations and if you don't, you're going to lose your job."

SAFETY PARAMOUNT IN SUPPORT OF MANDATORY VACCINES

Mayor Mrakas said the "insinuation" that supporting mandatory vaccine for all Town employees, volunteers and co-op students is comparable to not caring about jobs "is an absolutely misleading way of putting it."

"I think all of us are concerned about our employees, their jobs, their safety and our community as a whole," he said.

This was a theme that resonated with the four Council members who voted against the motion.

For Councillor Michael Thompson, the health and safety of employees was a top priority.

"The underlying rationale is straightforward: vaccinated employees are less likely to become infected and transmit COVID-19. It is simply a reasonable precaution to take for the protection of the workplace and as the employer we must take every precaution reasonable to protect our workers. It is not just about our employees; our workers have regular access to members of the public to a much greater degree than employees in an office building. Therefore, the use of this policy will not only protect our employees but members of the public they regularly interact with."

He went on to cite experts who said regular testing for COVID-19 is an ineffective way in stopping the spread, underscoring vaccinations in the fight against the virus.

"Safety is a key component of this discussion and many others that we have around the table. How many times in our decisions have we placed a premium on safety? After all, vaccinations offer the best protection we currently have against COVID-19 and all indications are that vaccination rules and policies are here to stay for quite some time. This policy ensures we provide our workers with the highest safety measure possible and we shouldn't compromise the safety of our employees or residents by adopting the proposed changes Councillor Gallo has put forward."

Councillor Harold Kim agreed that "vaccination is the best defence against COVID-19" while he also said he believed "in the individual right to not inject themselves with something they don't feel comfortable with."

"However, there is there is a consequence to every decision," he said. "We do not live in isolation, but rather we live in a community and work in a community with others. It's about a balance of interests. I do believe there is an ethical balance that needs to be struck? In my view, vaccination has a superior cost benefit profile compared with other alternatives."

"That said, I believe in people having gainful employment. In speaking with staff, amongst a staff of over 500 people at the Town, a very small number have disclosed some level of displeasure at the prospect of a vaccination policy. I have been assured by our CAO

that every possible step will be taken to ensure that all means to retain staff will be undertaken. I do believe we can make this work.?

The decision to not support the motion was a personal one for Councillor Sandra Humfryes, who said she has lost a close family member to the virus.

?The bottom line is safety first and our medical experts are asking us to please get vaccinated,? she said. ?This is how we protect ourselves, our community and our loved ones. I am not a doctor, I rely heavily on the doctors, the experts in this field, and if there is some true concern or some very serious reasons why this could not be done, I am sure the doctors will be able to help cope with some of the ways to get around to accommodate their work. The majority needs this vaccination to help ourselves and our families and we are the public sector here. We have an obligation to know that as our staff are interfacing with residents that we're not putting anyone in any kind of danger.?

By Brock Weir Editor Local Journalism Initiative Reporter