

Council ? staff relations policy could have public impact, say Councillors

By Brock Weir

New policies surrounding how members of Council interact with Municipal Staff left some local lawmakers questioning whether this will have an impact on how they can address concerns brought to them by local residents.

This week, following approval at the Committee level, Council is set to approve a new Council-Staff Relations Policy which will put a formal framework in place outlining a more ?defined process? in the relationship between a Council member and member of staff, following new changes introduced by the Provincial Government.

?A detailed and separate Council-Staff Relations Policy provides more structure and defined processes in the relationship between Council and staff,? said Town Clerk Mike de Rond in his report to Council.

The policy incorporates various components of the Town's existing Council Codes of Conduct and Ethics, including provisions that ?no Member shall compel staff to engage in partisan political activities or be subjected to threats or discrimination for refusing to engage in such activities,? that Council members be respectful of the role of staff to advise based on political neutrality, that no member shall impugn the ethical reputation or practices of staff, and acknowledging that only Council as a whole to direct staff to carry out specific tasks and functions.

?The proposed Council-Staff Relations Policy supplements the Council Code of Conduct and Code of Ethics by providing a more robust framework for business interactions between Council and staff,? Mr. de Rond continued. ?This policy is intended to provide detailed processes around Council-staff communications to ensure that standards and expectations are clear and understood.

?For example, one feature of the Policy is the differentiation between requests that could be considered ?routine' or ?non-routine.' An example of a routine request would be asking staff to contact a resident regarding a delegation to Council. A non-routine request could include requesting staff to provide information where significant research is required.?

While the policies contained in the new plan were received positively by Council, one particular tenet raised some questions.

?When a Member of Council desires to bring a matter to the attention of Staff on behalf of a member of the public, such as to ask a question or to act in a representative capacity for a constituent, the Member of Council shall communicate only with a Member of the Executive Leadership Team (ELT) or a Manager except in respect of Routine matters,? reads the draft

policy.

Councillor Wendy Gaertner, however, questioned how this would impact Members of Council addressing issues that are brought to their attention directly from a resident.

'I had a resident who was having an issue with her water billing,' she said. 'Her husband was not well and I said I would call staff

[and]

called the person in charge of water billing to get some clarification. Would that be appropriate?'

Doug Narodozny, CAO for the Town of Aurora, responded that the policy isn't intended to be completely prescriptive.

'If it is a quick thing that you know who the person to contact is and you feel that person can quickly give you an answer, then there is nothing wrong with that approach,' he said. 'If it starts to get into a complaint, maybe other people in the organization should be aware of the complaint. Without all the circumstances, I wouldn't want to say that it was inappropriate, if it was a casual hooking a resident up with the right person in the organization that looks after that.'

All Councillors, she said, have probably been in this situation before where a resident calls, says their water billing is too high, speak to a department, are given a checklist to identify the issue and nothing seems to be apply ' leaving them to seek assistance from their Council representative.

'I guess there's a lot of grey area,' said Councillor Gaertner.

While Councillor John Gallo said he was happy with limiting Council's interactions largely to directors and managers, his concerns lay in how meetings are arranged after a resident raises an issue.

'Requests for staff attendance at meetings organized by a Member of Council shall be made to the appropriate member of the ELT,' the policy continues. 'Notice of at least 24 hours should be provided except in urgent circumstances. Members of Council shall not attend a staff meeting, or a meeting involving staff and members of the public without first seeking permission to attend from the appropriate members of the ELT.'

'If a resident comes to us, has an issue, we direct it to a staff member and we want to be involved,' he said. 'Maybe we can reword [the policy] more from the perspective of, if there is a reason why we can't attend let's stipulate why that is, similar [to] the previous paragraph that said there was a privacy issue. If we're involved in a resident's concern and communicating,

we shouldn't necessarily be prohibited from being a part of the meeting or seek permission to be a part of that meeting unless there is a good reason.?

The intent of that wording, replied Mr. Nadorozny, was not to interfere with casual meetings on these issues, but if a Councillor approached a staff member and wanted to have a meeting between the staff member, the Councillor and member of the public, the ?staff member [could be] a bit intimidated by the fact the only other person in the room aside from the citizen who has a complaint? is the Councillor.

?I don't think we should be meeting with anyone below managerial anyway,? replied Councillor Gallo. Before that, it was only the directors [in the policy]. This is referring to the meetings and requesting permission to attend a meeting and meet with a manager or an ELT. I am somewhat bothered if anyone is being intimidated by any of us. I hope they don't. To me, if someone wants to stay in the loop, I don't want to necessarily have to ask for permission to be part of a discussion that maybe I brought to staff from a resident.?