

Proposed policy discriminates against religious groups, says Councillor

By Brock Weir

An attempt to formalize what kinds of events get a formal proclamation from Council raised the ire of a Councillor last week who said it discriminates against religious groups.

Council will consider a new policy that will establish a set criteria on what groups, events, and celebrations can be entitled to a formal proclamation by Council, pending further information from staff.

According to Town Clerk Lisa Lyons, Aurora currently issues an average of 38 proclamations each year to highlight events, celebrations and awareness campaigns hosted by various community organizations and international groups, but there has been a lack of administration policy to approve or deny requests.

Developed looking at the practices of other municipalities, the draft policy sets out new criteria requiring proclamations be issued to ?acknowledge the efforts, commitments and achievement of individuals and organizations that enhance the community of Aurora? and ?recognize public awareness campaigns, charitable fundraising campaigns and arts and cultural celebrations of significance to the Town.?

Future proclamations, should the policy be approved, will be limited to these public awareness and charity campaigns, arts and cultural celebrations, special honours for individuals and organizations and civic promotions.

Situations that will be side-stepped by the policy include any applications ?with no demonstrated interest or direct relationship? to Aurora, ?matters of political controversy, political parties or political organizations, religious organizations, or religious events or celebrations, businesses, attempts to influence Town Policy, national days around the world, and matters deemed discriminatory, among others.?

But the list of limitations, however, led to Councillor Harold Kim questioned whether prohibiting proclamations for religious organizations, events, or celebrations was, in itself, discriminatory.

Citing proclamations that might be made, for instance, on behalf of the Aurora United Church or the Salvation Army, Ms. Lyons said two different things were at play: a proclamation versus the Town raising awareness.

?A proclamation is much more formal,? she said, adding it was a best practice found in many municipalities. ?This is something most municipalities have for obvious reasons. There are some requests that we get sometimes from groups in the community that you would not want the Town proclaiming their events.?

While Councillor Kim said he was somewhat heartened that the Town has the ability to recognize organizations, entities and individuals that served in ?faith-based organizations? he was still not satisfied.

?The Charter of Rights and Freedoms guarantees the equal protection and equal benefit of the law to all. If we're proclaiming certain things to certain organizations, I don't know why we are saying we can't proclaim a faith-based organization unless it is something so amoral or ridiculous,? said Councillor Kim. ?I don't see how that would come out of a faith-based organization. All the rights any other organization has in Town, I believe faith based organizations who do such great work, if they want to proclaim something through the municipality I can't see why not.

?I think I am going to have to take a stand that we are the municipality, the umbrella, that serves these organizations, these entities and individuals, and they serve the community without prejudice. For us to exclude them from proclamations we either exclude for all or [are] inclusive. We have talked about diversity through the multicultural festival, and culture and religion is not that far off. For these reasons I cannot support this, at least that particular criteria.?

Some of these concerns were echoed by Councillor Jeff Thom, who used the Salvation Army's annual Kettle Drive, now underway, as an example. Banning a proclamation pertaining to the Kettle Drive because it is spearheaded by a ?Christian organization? makes no sense,? he contended.

Ms. Lyons, however, said the Kettle Drive would fit the proclamation criteria as a ?charitable fundraising campaign.? Councillors have requested examples of religious proclamations be presented to them before making a final decision.