Aurora moves to protect vulnerable communities in wake of rising antisemitism

Aurora has set in motion a number of measures to protect ?vulnerable? communities and spaces following rising antisemitism and other forms of hate throughout the Greater Toronto Area ? including right here in York Region.

Motions from both Mayor Tom Mrakas and Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo called on municipal staff to develop several initiatives to address the situation going forward, including a joint Task Force and funding to combat antisemitic hate, brought forward by the Councillor, and new rules suggested by the Mayor to prohibit demonstrations or ?activities that intimidate, incite hatred, violence, intolerance, or discrimination within a defined distance of vulnerable social infrastructure, including places of worship, schools, childcare centres, hospitals, and congregate care facilities? within Aurora.

Councillor Gallo's motion, the first of the two to be discussed at last week's Committee of the Whole meeting, called on Council to request the Federal and Provincial Governments work with the Region and the Town to establish a joint task force ?composed and not limited to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, Canadian Security Intelligence Services, Ontario Provincial Police, and York Regional Police, to coordinate intelligence, prevention, and enforcement efforts to combat and prevent antisemitic hate and violence, and to protect vulnerable communities.?

?I'm bringing forward this motion today because municipalities across Canada, including here in York Region, are seeing a deeply troubling rise in antisemitic incidents and hate-motivated actions,? said Councillor Gallo. ?These incidents are not abstract statistics. They impact real people in our community ? families, students, and residents who deserve to feel safe practicing their faith, attending their community events, and simply living their lives without fear.

?Aurora has always prided itself on being a welcoming and inclusive community. We are a Town where people of many faiths, cultures, and backgrounds live together and contribute to the strength of our community. Protecting that environment is not just a moral responsibility; it is a public safety responsibility. While policing is not a municipal responsibility alone, municipalities are often the first level of government that communities raise concerns about safety and rising incidents of hate. This motion recognizes that combatting hate-motivated violence requires coordination between all levels of government.?

The purpose of coordinating all levels of government and policing on this task force, he said, is to ?ensure that the intelligence and prevention efforts, and enforcement resources are aligned to address the growing threat of antisemitic hate and violence.?

The Councillor's motion also called for ?dedicated and sustainable? funding from the Provincial and Federal governments to support coordinated enforcement and prevention efforts, as well as to support the local police with operational increases as a result of hate-motivated incidents.

?It is also important to emphasize that while this motion specifically addresses the rise in antisemitic incidents, the goal is broader to ensure that all vulnerable communities are protected from hate and violence,? Councillor Gallo continued. ?Hate directed at one community ultimately threatens the safety and cohesion of the entire community. Aurora has always stood against discrimination, intolerance, and violence in all forms.

?This motion is an opportunity for our Council to reaffirm that commitment and to call on the Federal and Provincial partners to take coordinated action. I believe this motion sends a clear message that Aurora stands firmly against hate, that we support our residents who feel vulnerable, and that we believe government must work together to address this issue. I hope that members of Council will support this motion so that we can continue to ensure Aurora remains a safe and welcoming community for everyone.?

The motion was indeed passed unanimously, with Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese calling it ?a great place to start,? while Councillor Wendy Gaertner asked staff to consider ways to expedite follow-up information to Council.

Mayor Mrakas' motion also received unanimous support.

His motion called for staff to report back to Council at the earliest opportunity for a bylaw or policy framework that would ?prohibit demonstrations or activities that intimidate, incite hatred, violence, intolerance, or discrimination within a defined distance of vulnerable social infrastructure, including places of worship, schools, childcare centres, hospitals, and congregate care facilities within the Town of Aurora.?

It also called on staff to review best practices from other municipalities on these issues, and propose penalties that fit within the current provisions of the Municipal Act.

?At the heart of public service is a simple responsibility: to ensure the people we serve feel safe in their own community. Safe in their neighbourhoods, safe in their schools, safe in the institutions that serve them, and safe in the places where they gather to worship. Those spaces should be sanctuaries. Places where people come together to pray, to learn, to heal, and to support one another,? said Mayor Mrakas. ?But when hate and intimidation begin targeting these spaces, leadership demands that we stand up and act.

?Recently, just this last week, we saw something that should concern all of us: shots fired at three GTA synagogues, including one in Thornhill. Let me say that again. Shots fired at a place of worship. Think about that for a moment. A place where families gather, where children learn their traditions, where people seek peace and reflection. An act like that is not simply directed at a building. It is meant to send fear through an entire community, and when any community in our region is targeted with hate or intimidation, it becomes the responsibility of all of us to stand up and respond. Now, while we have not seen similar occurrences in our Town, leadership is not about waiting for something to happen before taking action. Leadership means being proactive, recognizing what is happening around us, and ensuring our community remains safe.?

But the motion, he cautioned, was ?not about one faith or one community alone,? but ?about protecting all vulnerable social infrastructure in our Town.?

?Every resident should feel safe accessing these spaces without fear or intimidation,? he said. ?Aurora is a diverse community made up of people from many faiths, cultures and backgrounds ? Jewish, Muslim, Christian, Hindu, Palestinian, Israeli, and many others ? and our responsibility at the municipal level is simple; to ensure everyone feels safe and respected in our community. Canada is a democracy. Peaceful expression and lawful protest are fundamental rights and they must always remain protected. But those rights must also be balanced with ensuring that residents can safely attend their synagogue, their church, their mosque, their temple, bring their children to school or daycare, or access healthcare and community services without feeling threatened. And that balance matters. And that is exactly what this motion asks staff to do.?

Support was clear around the Council table, with Councillor Gaertner questioning whether the entire Town could be considered such a zone.

?If through our bylaw, when it comes back, if it shows that it would incorporate the entire Town then so be it,? replied Mayor Mrakas. ?That's what we do, and we tell people that you're not allowed to come to this Town and create fear and intimidation in the Town of Aurora, period.?

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter