

Business signs in Aurora must have one of Canada's official languages

By Brock Weir

Businesses in Aurora will soon be required to have at least 50 per cent of their street signs in one of Canada's two official languages, following a Council decision last week.

Council gave the thumbs up to a new bylaw regulating the use of language on signs on February 14 following a 2016 Notice of Motion from Councillor Harold Kim.

Regulating the use of signs to require at least half of the information include English or French would promote Aurora as an inclusive community and a better place to live and do business.

A sign that incorporates neither English nor French may be seen as being exclusionary and not in the good theme of inclusiveness and community, which is the foundation of the Town of Aurora, found Afshin Bazar, Manager of Building Services, in Council's report on the matter. On September 24, staff attended a workshop [on this issue] with representatives from 13 different municipalities. As part of that group discussion, staff brought up the idea of introducing provisions that would require all foreign language signs to be translated to one of the official languages. Among all 13 municipalities, only the Town of Richmond Hill has such a provision in their sign bylaw. Almost all representatives were under the impression that such a provision may conflict with the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and therefore such a provision should be carefully reviewed and examined by a legal expert.

Richmond Hill's institution of their regulations, the report notes, went without a major hitch, but their rules do not apply to real estate, banner, window signs, banner signs, and similar signs where a sign permit is not required.

Staff is of the opinion that including a similar exemption in the proposed amendment would be against the intent of the motion and would defeat the purpose of introducing such an amendment. Furthermore, it must be noted that the number of permanent signs that have been erected in Richmond Hill which are in contravention of the language provision raise questions about the way this provision has been interpreted and/or the extent to which this provision has been implemented and enforced.

That being said, the formal wording of the motion calls for where a sign contains text in any language other than English or French, such a sign shall also include the translation of the text in either English or French which is comparable in size to the original text.

Exceptions include trademarks, trade names, business names, logos and symbols.

While municipal staff concede the bylaw could be subject to potential challenges to the Charter, the move received a vote of support from the Aurora Chamber of Commerce.

We believe it is necessary for local businesses to continue to increase their customer base in order to grow and thrive, said Javed Khan, Chair of the Aurora Chamber of Commerce at last week's Council meeting. Business signage exclusively utilizing a language other than English or French would prevent a significant percentage of Aurora's population from understanding the goods and services offered. Businesses with foreign language signage could potentially alienate a substantial client base as a result, subsequently limiting their ability to prosper. We also value fair treatment and equal opportunity for all businesses within the Town of Aurora. Foreign language business signage that cannot be understood by a significant percentage of our community could prevent that community from having an equal opportunity to take advantage of goods, services and special offers.

The Chamber of Commerce values inclusiveness in business and an inclusive community at large. As observed in other York Region communities, businesses using foreign language-only signage can lead to segregation of ethnic enclaves. Such segregation has the potential to isolate minorities and may be interpreted as unwelcoming to the population of English or French speaking residents.

All Canadians, old or new, need a common language to facilitate communication and ensure an inclusive community. A vibrant and flourishing business community requires a certain shared language to enable communication and understanding across diverse cultures.

An additional consideration is safety, noted Mr. Khan. First responders, for instance, can face an increased risk entering an unknown business, particularly if it contains hazardous materials posing an additional danger to emergency situations such as fire.

Appropriate language on signs will allow them to take the necessary precautions before proceeding.

I think what this amendment does is bring inclusivity and make people welcome because we share a common bond, and that is language, said Councillor Harold Kim. Inclusivity is the aim and there have been a few cries of political incorrectness, which really amounts to, in my interpretation, to be reverse discrimination.

Inclusivity means a common language that is enjoyed by a majority of residents of the Town and the Region. I think the official

response from the Chamber really highlights all of the positives. When you have pretty well 99 per cent of the business owners in favour of the amendment there really is nothing more to say.?