

Council requested to support Bill 5 to push anti-harassment legislation

A plea has been sent to Aurora Town Council to endorse Bill 5, which aims to protect municipal workers from harassment and abuse in their workplaces.

Council voted to accept the delegation request and have asked for a report to be sent back from municipal staff with more information on the proposed legislation.

On December 6 at the General Committee meeting, Jenna Irving from the collective advocacy effort 'Women of Ontario Say No' presented the need for supporting Bill 5, Stopping Harassment and Abuse by Local Leaders Act, and explained that the purpose of Bill 5 is to provide 'the tools to help keep municipal workers safe.'

'Unfortunately, currently there are no appropriate tools in place like there are in any other work settings to hold workers accountable if they have been found to have been committing harassment,' Irving said.

Irving said that the Occupational Health and Safety Act does not apply to elected officials who have committed harassment and abuse in the workplace. The most severe penalty that can be imposed on elected officials is suspension of pay for 90 days and there is no process for removing Councillors from office.

Bill 5 would permit municipalities to direct the Integrity Commissioner to apply to the court to vacate a member's seat for failing to comply with the municipality's workplace violence or harassment policies. Irving added that this would be after a harassment claim was received and first investigated.

The request was for Council to pass a motion to endorse Bill 5 and write a letter of support to be sent to local MPPs, Premier Doug Ford, the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, the Association of the Municipalities of Ontario and MPP for Orléans, Stephen Blais.

'It's really simple: It's a matter of keeping the workplaces safe. It's the right thing to do. It's accountability through transparency and fair processes that should exist, but it currently does not for elected officials.'

Liberal MPP Stephen Blais introduced the Bill in March 2021. Irving said that due to the timing of provincial elections in June, the Bill was not debated again despite receiving full unanimous support after its second reading the following year.

'This is something that should already be in place,' Irving said.

In response to a question from Ward 3 Councillor Gaertner about the reported need for the Bill, Irving said that the Bill was indeed a result of expressed need especially in municipalities such as Brampton, Barrie, Mississauga, and Ottawa who have already decided to endorse Bill 5.

When Ward 2 Councillor Gilliland inquired about various 'tools' that have been investigated and whether going through the Integrity Commissioner was the best course of action to best protect municipal workers, Irving said she would follow up with more information.

'But the principle of what you're trying to achieve 100 per cent I support that,' Councillor Gilliland said.

By Elisa Nguyen