

# Maternity benefits important to top employers, says Council

**By Brock Weir**

When it comes to maternity benefits, the better the deal the better the chance of attracting and retaining good workers.

But what if these are benefits offered by a corporation that is largely funded by the taxpayers, such as a Town of Aurora, where many residents do not enjoy the same benefits in their own workplaces?

This was a question grappled with by Councillors last week at the Committee level as they considered recommendations to provide a boost for maternity and parental leave.

According to Neil Garbe, Aurora's CAO, adding additional benefits in these cases could cost the Town approximately \$5,000 per year for a \$20 million payroll and would go a long way in making municipal job opportunities more attractive to qualified individuals.

“It is a cost-effective enhancement that aligns well with the anticipated target audience from an attraction and retention perspective,” he said in a report to Council. “In addition, the policy will also assist to attract and retain high value female employees who now make up more than half of all post-secondary enrolment.”

It also helps, he added, in the Town's aspirations to make the 2014 list of the GTA's top 100 employers.

Councillors approved the recommendations at committee last week and they come forward for final approval by Council this week.

“This is \$5,000 a year to be able to provide this service to our employees, and I think a fair question to ask around the table is what is the price of a good employee?” ventured Councillor Paul Pirri. “If we can have a culture where we can foster good employees and people who want to be here and people who are happy to be here, will that ultimately help offset the \$5,000 cost? I think so.

“Maybe they are more willing to go the extra mile and make sure things are done, rather than saying it is halfway there. I think it is important we support our employees in a fiscally responsible manner.”

Also in agreement with the recommendation was Councillor Chris Ballard, who said he was “not afraid...to strike out on a more progressive tone” in his support.

“We're not being asked to go out and commit a terribly large amount of money...and I think it is important to make this gesture to our staff who are exceptionally valuable,” he said. “We talk about the economic times and the unemployment issues today, but the real issue today and the increasing issue in the days ahead will be to attract and maintain skilled workers. If this is an investment in retaining skilled workers, then I am certainly all for it.”

Others around the table weren't quite as enthusiastic and pointed to what they felt was an inequity between what they are able to offer to Town employees versus what the average Aurora resident enjoys in their own workplaces.

“I think the government is quite generous in allowing women to take the time off to have a child and guarantee that her job won't interfere with her coming back to work and her job will still be here,” said Councillor Evelyn Buck, noting having a child was a personal choice. “I think the rules we have now take very good care of a person. I don't think the taxpayers should be looking at this financial benefit to the people who are here and made the decision to have a child.”

Councillor Michael Thompson expressed similar sentiments. He said he believed it was an “appropriate goal” for Aurora to make the Top 100 list, but there are different ways to get there beyond financial incentives. These incentives could be the ability to work from home and greater flexibility in the workplace.

?I do have a concern because I do not necessarily see it as being equitable and fair to the residents of Town,? he said. ?StatsCan says with regards to this benefit, only one in five mothers receive it. I look at that statistic and it tells me that less than 20 per cent of the residents of Aurora receive this.

?We know we don't give them a break on their taxes as they're on maternity leave and yet we're looking for them to be able to contribute to something they themselves do not enjoy, and that is the inequality between the two. If it was a common benefit that most people receive I would absolutely support it.?