

Municipal social media channels need safeguards from hateful messages, says resident

The Town of Aurora's social media platforms need safeguards against hateful comments, according to local resident Shaheen Moledina.

Moledina made the request to Council last week following a series of subsequently-deleted messages that were posted on the Town's social media channels under a post related to Islamic Heritage Month.

While she said she was appreciative of the fact that the Town deleted the messages in question, they were left online for too long and exposed "a troubling undercurrent of hate and intolerance that cannot and must not be ignored."

"Aurora has a long-standing pride in its commitment to diversity, inclusion and respect for all," she told Council members at last week's Committee of the Whole meeting. "Our community thrives because of its people - people of different faiths, backgrounds and cultures who together make Aurora a vibrant and welcoming place to live. It is therefore deeply concerning that our Town's own social media platform became a space where hateful and inflammatory comments were allowed to remain visible for nearly 24 hours."

"Let me be clear: these were not harmless opinions. These are dehumanizing statements that perpetuate fear, division and discrimination. As a community, we must ask ourselves, what do we stand for? And are we willing to remain silent on the face of hate? The answer must be a resounding no."

"Our silence in moments like this is a form of complicity," she added, noting that municipal social media channels "or any public place" can't be allowed to become "breeding grounds for intolerance."

"After numerous calls and emails, the hateful comments were eventually removed and commenting was restricted. Thank you very much. I wish to thank Councillors who personally followed up with this matter. Your responsiveness was appreciated. However, the situation has made one thing very clear: Our system needs improvement. For the record, to prevent this [from] happening again, I'm calling for a comprehensive action plan to ensure that our online platforms truly reflect Aurora's values and legacy. This plan should include clear community guidelines, establish and enforce a transparent set of rules that explicitly prohibit hate speech, discrimination and harassment on all Town platforms. Active moderation, employ dedicated staff or utilize technology to actively monitor comments, ensure hateful rhetoric is immediately removed and banned."

"Hate has no room in Aurora, and certainly not in Canada. Promotion of positive dialogue, encourage constructive and respectful conversations about diversity, inclusion and culture - let our platforms become spaces of education and understanding, not division."

Improvements, she noted, could include education and awareness, clear reporting mechanisms, a "simple and accessible" process for residents to report "hateful or discriminatory" comments, and she also called for a public statement from Mayor and Council on the matter.

"The Town of Aurora has both the responsibility and stated intention to uphold respect for diversity, including religious diversity," she concluded. "Our social media platforms must embody the same principle. We have the power. Let's come together, residents, Councils, community leaders, to reject hate and embrace understanding. Let us stand in solidarity with our Muslim neighbours and with all who experience discrimination. Our [municipal] slogan, 'You're in Good Company,' needs to be upheld digitally. Canada is a mosaic and that is our strength. And it is reflected in our Town."

Mayor Tom Mrakas responded that "hate has no place" in Aurora.

"It is unacceptable and should never be tolerated, so I want to thank you for bringing to our attention. Vulgar language, regardless of

whether it's hate speech, defamation of persons or characters, all that stuff needs to be taken seriously, and we do not allow it here in the Town," he said. "I know staff are working around the clock to make sure that this doesn't happen again and we're constantly looking at how we can always better our systems. We know that social media is always evolving, and as you mentioned, bots or whatnot could be happening. But we need to always be looking at how we can improve each and every day to make sure that this type of thing never happens in our Town."

Similarly, Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland acknowledged the "negative" rhetoric that exists on social media.

"There's a lot of negativity out there right now, and when it comes to an official body like the Town of Aurora, we should have some sort of policies in place to help safeguard that as we are the ones representing your community, and we do not want to exude that as something that we feel is acceptable," she said. "I feel like we have acknowledged quick and swift. Communications behind the scenes has given us an update just recently, as of, I believe it was yesterday" with an update. I know that they're being very proactive and that communication piece should be released shortly."

By Brock Weir
EditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter