

New social media usage policy could be coming for Councillors

New policies to oversee how Aurora Council members use social media could be in the works.

Last week, Council, following a motion from Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland, directed the Town's Integrity Commissioner to develop a social media policy to be included as part of Council's Code of Conduct.

Additionally, the motion asks that the Integrity Commissioner to review the Town's Code of Conduct to strengthen and protect any violation of political intermeddling, bullying and harassment in the workplace, undermining of Council's decisions and copyright of altering Town images, and that staff report back on an appropriate policy to address copyright of altering of Town images, said the Town in a statement following the meeting. The motion notes that censorship, controlled narratives, misinformation, and political intermeddling has become a growing concern worldwide within social media platforms and other forms of communications.

While the motion for a separate social media policy was carried unanimously, the balance was passed on a vote of 4 ? 2 with opposition coming from Mayor Tom Mrakas, Ward 4 Councillor Michael Thompson, while Ward 6 Councillor Harold Kim was absent for the vote.

Social media has really become a large part of our lives, whether we want it, whether we love it, whether we hate it, whether we need it, and it has really been a conduit for us to communicate with society in general, said Councillor Gilliland. It has both negative and positive impacts all over the world and one of the positive ways it is a way to connect and share with each other very quickly. However, with that, there are a lot of negative impacts as well. Various things could be through censorship, controlled narratives, misinformation, and political intermeddling. There has been a lot of growing concern with that worldwide.

In fact, the Integrity Commissioner has recommended that all municipalities would benefit from a social media policy and more detailed provisions on communication in general. In addition, we should also review the usage of our Town-owned copyright material and strengthen the Council Code of Conduct in general just for the reasons mentioned in this motion. At the end of the day, we want to continue ensuring we respect each other, ethical principles are kept in mind, we're communicating with our Council members, staff and the general public. I think it is in our best interest to have a review and leave it in the hands of the Integrity Commissioner to come back with a viable solution we can all embrace.

In response to the motion, Mayor Mrakas said he had no problem with a social media policy, citing a similar policy presented to the Region of York by the Integrity Commissioner, but he said some of the matters in Councillor Gilliland's motion, including bullying and harassment, were not part of the Commissioner's purview; rather, it was a human resources issue.

Similarly, he said matters of copyright were also beyond the Integrity Commissioner's duties.

Undermining of Council decisions already exists in our Code of Conduct. I am not sure how it gets strengthened. The strengthening is the Integrity Commissioner making a decision of whether it is undermining Council's decision or not. It is already in there, so I am not sure whether the second clause is needed, he said.

The point of the motion, Councillor Gilliland responded, was to strengthen the language contained in the Code of Conduct.

I would expect that the Integrity Commissioner would advise communications if there are things in HR that need to be adjusted, she said. I think it is a collaboration where appropriate.

In his remarks, particularly related to matters of copyright, Councillor Thompson said he would like the policy itself to be put on a future Council agenda so all lawmakers could comment on the policy as a whole and make suggestions for possible revisions.

Mayor Mrakas went on to question the timing of the motion.

"When we're asking to do something like this, for policy to come back we're usually looking at solving a problem," he said. "I am just wondering what the problem is. Can someone explain to me what the problem is? Is someone out there copyrighting our stuff that we need to address this?"

"This is in protection of all Town images whether it is myself, staff members, or somebody outside. People pay for sponsorship of certain events and when Town Staff create images and it is released, they have specific policies in place where they have to release things with a.m., p.m., with dots and certain things they have to follow. If there is a Town image for an event, that should be what is released and I think it should be consistent all across and I believe that it is common practice in the media and advertising industry in general and I don't think there is anything wrong with making sure we have a proper policy in place to address that."

"I still haven't heard if there is an actual problem happening now," he replied.

Tasking the Integrity Commissioner to develop a social media policy carried on a vote of 6-0, while the second clause that the Integrity Commissioner review the Code of Conduct to strengthen and protect any violation of political intermeddling, bullying and harassment in the workplace, undermining of Council decisions and copyright of altering Town Images; That staff review and report back on an appropriate policy to address copyright of altering Town images? carried on the 4-2 vote mentioned above.

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