

Respect, communication in focus as Council returns and election looms

The democratic process was in the spotlight when Council returned from its summer break as it considered two motions from Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland.

The motions came forward at this month's Committee of the Whole meeting, with one calling for Council's endorsement of the Elect Respect Campaign, which aims to keep debate focused on public policy, not individuals, while the other called for Councillors to have control over their own microphones during Council and Committee meetings.

A healthy democracy thrives when all individuals can participate safely, equitably, and meaningfully in public life, said Councillor Gilliland in the first motion. Aurora, like many municipalities across Ontario, is witnessing an erosion of civil discourse and growing hostility in the political arena, both in person and online. Elected officials at all levels, particularly women and those from equity-deserving communities, are experiencing increased threats, harassment, and toxic engagement that deter civic participation.

Social media platforms, while powerful tools for engagement, have contributed to a climate of disrespect and polarization that discourages individuals from seeking or maintaining public office. Inclusive and respectful governance results in better decision-making and stronger representation, especially when voices of diverse genders, identities, races, ethnicities, sexual orientations, ages, and abilities are present at Municipal Council tables.

The campaign, she noted, was first brought forward last year by elected officials in Halton Region, which, in turn, inspired a further movement with the launch of a Parliamentary Civility Pledge to promote conduct among elected officials.

The Councillor's motion called for Council to commit to the spirit of the Elect Respect Pledge, including treating all individuals with respect in every setting public, private, and digital; speaking out against harassment, intimidation, and personal attacks; keeping debate focused on ideas and public policy, not individuals; fostering an environment where people of all backgrounds feel safe and supported in seeking and holding public office; urging relevant authorities to ensure the safety and protection of elected officials facing threats or abuse; and demonstrating leadership through integrity, accountability, and mutual respect among colleagues and constituents.

As we do approach the next election, it's crucial we uphold respect in all our interactions, she said at Committee. Let us commit to fostering a culture of civility and inclusivity, not just among ourselves, but also towards all members of the public and other candidates. This way we can ensure a more positive and constructive political environment for everyone. I think it is very timely and I really hope that everybody will support this and hopefully we will all lead by example.

That support came and was endorsed by Committee before final ratification expected at Council this week.

At the meeting, Ward 6 Councillor Harold Kim questioned whether the motion included municipal staff with respect to Council, and Councillor Gilliland said the intent was to include everybody, including staff.

I agree with the intent of this motion, but I do think it's important to recognize that words on paper are only as strong as the actions behind them, said Councillor Kim. If you want the community to take this seriously, then we need to live this commitment every day in Council, in the community, and yes, on social media. Otherwise, this pledge risks being seen as symbolic only.

SHOULD COUNCILLORS CONTROL THEIR MICROPHONES IN CHAMBERS?

The second motion from Councillor Gilliland called for a staff report on changes that could be made to the audio-visual system in Council Chambers that would allow each elected member to control their microphone during the debate, while also maintaining the Meeting Chair's ability to keep order.

?The principles of democratic participation, equitable speech, and transparent governance are foundational to effective municipal proceedings,? said the Councillor in her motion. ?The current practice of centralized microphone control may inadvertently restrict or delay a member's ability to respond to discussion, raise a point of order, or contribute meaningfully to debate.

?Granting members operational autonomy over their microphones does not diminish the Chair's authority under the Municipal Act, 2001, and the Procedural By-law to maintain order and decorum.?

While Councillor Kim supported the motion as it simply called for a report, he expressed his doubts over whether moving in this direction would indeed maintain the Chair's authority.

?The Municipal Act requires us to have a Procedural Bylaw and that bylaw vests the Chair with the responsibility to manage, debate, and recognize speakers,? he said. ?If we move to autonomous microphones, we risk undermining the Chair's ability to maintain control of the meeting and enforce the rules consistently.

?For me, it's about preserving fairness, structure and respect for the process.?

In response, Councillor Gilliland said several municipalities allow autonomous microphones, and this was a viewpoint shared by Ward 5 Councillor John Gallo.

?For context, we at this table, before the new (A/V) system had the ability of turning on and off our microphones as we saw fit and one of the other municipalities, our friendly neighbours to the north, Newmarket, functions perfectly well and they have autonomous microphones in their Chamber so I really don't see an issue with this.

?If only for the fact that as Councillor Gilliland has mentioned, there are many more viewers online and perhaps even we want to review meetings just to get a better sense of what the discussion was in the future and it's unfortunate if the microphone is off, it doesn't capture anything and that's not fair. If someone is speaking and it's not captured, that's not right and it will never be captured because nothing else will capture it. So, if nothing else, for that reason alone, we should have control of our own microphones and I will be voting in favour of this.?

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter