

Should Aurora become a sanctuary town? ? Toronto motion raises questions

By Brock Weir

Could Aurora become a Sanctuary Town?

A request by Councillor Sandra Humfries last week to endorse Toronto's affirmation of its status as a 'sanctuary city', in the wake of international demonstrations protesting U.S. President Donald Trump's executive order placing an indefinite ban on immigration from seven predominantly Muslim nations, raised questions around the local Council table last week.

The councils of both Aurora and Toronto met last Tuesday, January 31. Earlier in the day, the City re-affirmed its status as a 'sanctuary city' which gives all residents 'full rights to access all city services and city-administered services without fear, regardless of their documentation status.'

Their motion went on to 'reject discrimination based on religious, ethnic, or national origin, affirms that refugees are welcome in our communities, and [Council] stands united with cities around the world against islamophobia, xenophobia and racism and calls on all Canadians, community leaders, and elected officials to speak out against discrimination and hate in our communities, across the country and around the world.'

Hours later, Councillor Sandra Humfries brought Toronto's motion to Council's attention during new business calling on Aurora to endorse the city's decision.

'I would just like our Town to endorse it and support it,' she said. 'I think it is a wonderful reminder that we are an open-armed, welcoming country. Aurora has opened arms to our many multicultural nationalities and we have compassion for our fellow differences. I would love for us to endorse and create our own motion for this as well. I want to send a clear message to the Federal government to continue our immigration laws and policies, and we do not divide and mimic anything of our neighbours in terms of the actions recently displayed.'

The motion stopped there 'for now.'

Before it was ultimately taken off the table, in Councillor Humfries' hopes that it could be re-introduced at next week's meeting, some Council members said they had concerns on two fronts: the first being not having enough time to consider the full motion at the eleventh hour, and the second not being fully sure of what implications might come to Aurora by endorsing the motion.

'I am fully in support of the City of Toronto being a sanctuary city, they have been for years, [but] they had full background of knowing what it is and what it entails,' said Councillor Paul Pirri. 'I am in full support of the sentiment, but what does it mean to endorse a city doing this?'

While Councillor Humfries, citing the welcoming of Syrian refugee families into the Aurora community last year, said it shows Aurora believes in sanctuary cities, she said it was particularly important in the light of the January 29 terrorist attack on a Quebec City mosque.

'I think it makes more sense for us to look at becoming a sanctuary town ourselves than just saying 'Good on the city of Toronto and endorsing their actions,' added Councillor Pirri. 'For us, just to endorse what the city of Toronto is doing when we have no way of jumping in ourselves, I think we're missing an opportunity here, so I will be voting against endorsing what they have done.'

Councillor Jeff Thom offered a similar view to Councillor Pirri, saying he did not feel he had enough time to fully consider all the points in Toronto's motion.

'Of course, everyone abhors discrimination of any kind and I think we should all be working to eliminate that kind of discrimination but I think we should be given the courtesy to know what we're voting on before we vote on it,' he said. 'There is a lot of stuff with sanctuary cities that I don't know. I don't know in the Canadian context what it means.'

Councillor Wendy Gaertner, on the other hand, said what jumped out at her was Toronto's message 'to send out a clear message'rejecting all division, intolerance, and hate.' While she said that is something she supports, an alarm bell was raised with 'a moral obligation to speak up whenever a government declares lawful refugees, visitors, and even its own permanent residents inadmissible or unwelcome.'

'They are actually making an anti-Trump statement, which may be appropriate for Toronto, but I am not sure it is appropriate for our municipality, even though I am sure many of us agree with it,' said Councillor Gaertner. 'I would like to support this resolution and I think it is fantastic Toronto has stepped up.'

Similarly, Councillor Michael Thompson said he did not see a problem in endorsing Toronto's motion, as Council often supports resolutions sent their way from other municipalities.

'I don't have an issue declaring my approval of what Toronto did,' he said. 'Good for them. Now, if we want to take it to the next

stage and do more with something that is Aurora-based, then so be it. It is a place to start. I appreciate Councillor Humfryes bringing it forward and I certainly will be in support of it to endorse it. Hopefully something more comes out of it.?