

Social media should be used to foster 'tolerance and acceptance,' says Councillor



By Brock Weir

A community's diversity is its strength, according to Councillor Wendy Gaertner, and now it is time for Council to put more of its weight behind that sentiment.

Next month, Councillor Gaertner is set to introduce a Notice of Motion calling on the Town to use its communications resources and channels to 'foster positive conversations' about the 'increasingly diverse community of Aurora' and promote events celebrating our differences.

Citing events such as June's Pride Week and September's Multicultural Celebration set for Ada Johnson Park in September as but two examples, she says all events across York Region that promote 'tolerance and acceptance' should be trumpeted to the wider community.

'Aurora is a community that values inclusion, acceptance and diversity,' says Councillor Gaertner in her motion, 'and Town Council affirms that diversity is welcome and makes our community stronger. We want to send a strong message that we reject intolerance based on race, religion, ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation [and] respect and acceptance of our differences are fostered by knowledge and understanding.'

The idea for a motion of this nature stems from discussions around the Council table last month when Councillor Sandra Humfries asked Council to endorse the City of Toronto's motion reaffirming its status as a 'sanctuary city.' While Aurora Council members said they didn't disagree with the strongly worded sentiment, they got tangled on the details, particularly what the implications might be for Aurora by simply endorsing Toronto's stance.

'The motion from the City of Toronto was very strong and was in the context of a sanctuary city and that is not Aurora,' Councillor Gaertner tells *The Auroran*. 'We could not put forward a motion like that because it just doesn't fit in with our community, so how can we take that intent and work it into something that would be appropriate to Aurora. It was a big-metropolitan-centre motion and we just couldn't present it as it was. The question for me then became how can Aurora send a clear message that we honour diversity and how can we communicate it?'

'The motion simply comes from a place that we have to honour each other, and it doesn't matter if it is sexual orientation, race, or religion. It just felt right to me that I should put something forward that we should honour diversity and see what we can do about it.'

Toronto's move wasn't the only catalyst for this Notice of Motion. Councillor Gaertner says she was also inspired by the plight of York Region Pride having to find a new location for their Pride Parade after the Town of Richmond Hill told them changes would have to be made.

Organizers approached Aurora as a possible venue for the parade, but were told existing Aurora policies would have to be looked at in order to see the best fit.

'The issue is that we would have to close Yonge Street and there are policies in place about parades,' says Councillor Gaertner.

'Because the Pride Parade is still relatively small, I am not sure how we could accommodate it. I am not sure if we would be able to

shut down Yonge Street for a period of time to incorporate a parade [smaller than the Canada Day and Santa Under the Stars parades].

?I am very proud of Aurora. We have with York Regional Police raising the Pride flag at Town Hall and having ceremonies inside. York Regional Police have been the leaders in promoting diversity, perhaps the leaders in Canada, so we are very fortunate to have them as part of our community and partnering in celebrating Pride week.?

Councillor Gaertner's motion is not the only wheel turning at Town Hall when it comes to inclusion and diversity. For the past two Wednesdays, Aurora's Parks and Recreation Department hosted roundtables for the public to weigh in on what they would like to see in the upcoming Multicultural Festival, which attracted some significant input from a cross section of Aurora residents and organizations.

?The community is becoming more diverse and this is about understanding that, appreciating that, and celebrating that,? says Councillor Gaertner. ?We do this through education and information and it is not a heavy-handed approach. Let's get this on the table. It's time! Let's do it.?