

Social media use, Strong Mayor Powers keeping Integrity Commissioner busy

Social media use and many of the unknowns surrounding the use of Strong Mayor Powers has kept Aurora's Integrity Commissioner with much to do over the last two years, according to Janice Atwood.

Atwood of Principles Integrity serves as Aurora's Integrity Commissioner, a position which provides advice to elected officials on ethics matters and evaluates complaints levelled against elected officials and municipal staff by members of the public.

She presented her most recent report on activities to Council at the Committee level last week.

Since she last reported to Council two years ago, Atwood said she and the Principles team have responded to 17 separate complaints from members of the public, with three matters still before them. Of the complaints that have been evaluated, none have warranted a report to the public, she said.

'If the facts, as alleged, are proven true, would in fact not breach the Code, then we typically do not proceed with a public report, but rather we conclude with a disposition letter back to the complainant to explain why we will not be proceeding. We provide a summary of that, including the explanation and the reasons to the respondent members so that they understand as well that there has been a complaint [and] the nature of it, and these are the reasons we're not proceeding on the matter,' she explained. 'We don't treat it as a public report, but, on the other hand, we don't treat it as confidential - it's simply from us to the individual complainant, the individual respondent.'

While these matters don't come as public reports, Atwood's presentation shone light on the general nature of these complaints, with social media use proving a prevailing trend in many municipalities.

She warned elected members who are active on social media to be 'cautious' and not 'arbitrarily block or mute others without notice or justification' and that things which wouldn't be said publicly in a meeting about another member shouldn't be said on social media.

'One should be equally respectful on social media as they would be in person or in a public forum,' said Atwood, noting other issues that came before her related to 'lack of diligent attendance' at Boards, 'alleged conflicts of interest where we found none', and missteps in the use of procedural bylaws.

'We have also seen concerns arise out of exercise of Strong Mayor Powers,' she continued, adding that given the recent application of Strong Mayor Powers by the Provincial Government, there is still much to be 'adjudicated or determined' in how they are exercised across Ontario.

'One [thing we could say] is that mayors perhaps ought to have regard for the previous decisions or positions of Council when exercising their Strong Mayor powers,' she said. 'There's nothing in writing on this, but we think it's probably good policy at some point and might make its way into, for example, the language of a Code of Conduct or a Procedural Bylaw or something of that effect, just really urging mayors to at least have regard for the work that's been deliberated by Council in exercising their Strong Mayor Power.'

Looking over the use of Strong Mayor Powers across Ontario, Atwood said that it's 'all over the map' and whether this can be attributed to the powers or not, it has been a 'very active term of Council in many municipalities' from their perspective.

'We have 60 municipal clients and we see all sorts of levels of activities,' said Atwood, responding to questions from Ward 1 Councillor Ron Weese on how Aurora fared compared to other municipalities on the complaint front. 'Some, from our perspective, cause us to be extremely active and others we hardly have the opportunity to interact at all with except for bringing an annual report. I would say you (Aurora) are in that upper tier of busy-ness from our perspective, but not the highest in terms of level of activity.'

?I think it comes from having an active citizenry who is very engaged, and I do think there's also a very high level of activity with social media and that sometimes can drive activity that we end up seeing something, a concern raised. [In] some municipalities, Councillors have very little social media activity and others it's very active. I think Aurora falls into that other category.?

On the social media front, Ward 2 Councillor Rachel Gilliland said that with ?a lot of the recent stuff going on in the world,? people stress and sometimes ?it does come out within municipal politics [and] Provincial and Federal as well?, and she was ?grateful? to have an Integrity Commissioner on hand to assist.

That said, however, she said it would be nice to have a chart or key drivers presented to Council to get a better idea of ?complaint-driven data.? She also asked Atwood to weigh in on whether she felt social media and Strong Mayor powers have ?really elevated the temperament of whether it's community or within Council and staff? over the term of the report.

Atwood said she didn't know whether she would say Strong Mayor Powers have been an activity driver, but conceded both these powers and social media have been factors in ?some of our activity.

?Social media certainly is a factor. I don't know that it's any greater in the past two years than it was in the previous, let's say, term. One of the things I think that has driven our activity and this is just really anecdotal, it's not data necessarily statistically, I haven't analyzed the statistics, but certainly from my sort of vantage point, I would say what we see is a bit of? contagion when people see certain activities elsewhere, they want to get on board, and some of that drives a lot of activity that comes to our doorstep.

?Often when I think citizenry are agitated about things, the only contact they may have is at the local level. They don't always have the ability to reach higher even though their concerns may be caused by higher events. So, I think sometimes you folks are on the front line.?

Atwood and her team are currently working on a draft Social Media Policy for the Town of Aurora, which she said she anticipates coming to Council before the end of June.

By Brock Weir