

Vaccine debate spills into Diversity & Inclusion Plan talks

Can a workplace that requires employees to be vaccinated against COVID-19 truly be an inclusive one?

That was the question posed to consultants last week as Aurora Council considered a number of recommendations in a draft Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Action Plan for Town Hall.

As The Auroran reported last week, the Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (DEI) Action Plan is being considered for implementation to ensure the municipal public workplace is reflective of the community it serves.

This includes putting safeguards in place to ensure 'unconscious bias' of any kind is not a factor in the hiring process and ensuring workplace training is inclusive and conscious of various needs.

While the plan is still yet to go before the Town's Anti-Black Racism and Anti-Racism Task Force for their review and input, Council weighed in on the draft plan and the actions contained within it last week.

'I am excited for the groundwork being done here and the ability to continue to build upon and grow the culture of our organization because I think it is so essential,' said Councillor Michael Thompson, adding he was looking forward to input from the Task Force.

This enthusiasm was shared by Councillor Sandra Humfries who said not only was the 'timing' right to bring this forward but so was the content.

'We need to do this,' she said. 'It is so important now more than ever and the more we can train and learn and really have those values, those visions, [and] the mission values understood. This is very, very important and all these areas are very important for us to work on.'

Councillor Rachel Gilliland was also supportive, adding that setting out core values and laying it out for staff and Council members alike to follow was important as well. In implementation, however, she asked how technology would play a part on achieving the goals.

In response, consultant Dr. Nafeesa Jalal said that technology will be particularly important in the hiring process to ensure 'unconscious bias' is not a factor in new hires at Town Hall. One such example is programs that remove factors like name and gender from the application process so candidates are evaluated on merits alone.

Dr. Jalal noted further that Council needs to consider courses of action for employees who 'aren't in line' with the principles of the plan.

'We as an organization need to set our standards to define who we are at the Town of Aurora,' she said. 'If we say we're an anti-racist organization, then we're an anti-racist organization. If someone comes into our organization or already exists in our organization who is okay with racism, we have to be very clear in saying we appreciate and value you as a person, but this is not going to be acceptable. I think as soon as you, as a Town, an organization, define yourself to say, 'We stand for diversity and inclusion, we welcome people with diverse backgrounds because that is who we are as Canadians?' we are going to say everyone has a voice at the table regardless of who you are and what you are.'

'Does everyone within the organization feel we are a fair organization? Sometimes we feel we're a fair organization, but when we speak to people they might have different opinions.'

But will municipal employees who are now required to get vaccinated against COVID-19 without a valid reason for exemption have different opinions on how 'fair' Town Hall is? That was a question that Councillor John Gallo, who was one of three Council

members earlier this month who argued against mandatory vaccines for all municipal employees, wanted answers to.

'In terms of equity and inclusion, the Town of Aurora recently put in a policy to mandate that staff provide personal medical status regarding their vaccination,' said Councillor Gallo. 'If you don't, ultimately you could be fired. In terms of equity and inclusion, how do we, I guess, bridge that gap?... Reading the report and listening to you (Dr. Jalal) I had difficulty bridging that gap.'

While the recent mandate was not something Dr. Jalal said she considered in her recommendations, she provided her opinion based not only in her role as a consultant, but in her role as a person with a doctorate in Public Health, working on the front lines of the pandemic.

'The importance of vaccinations is commonplace to all of us,' she said, adding that she was wearing 'both hats' while addressing the question. 'The human rights piece comes in where some people might not be able to take vaccines because of medical history? if you have a policy if someone is able to provide you a medical record to say they are not, for medical reasons, able to take the vaccine for issues that they would have, then we may have to consider that. We may have to say the vaccination policy is required from everyone at the Town with the exception of A, B, C, D and that exception for A, B, C, D is where we incorporate our fairness piece. We want to be fair to everyone, so we can't have a blanket approach that everyone is vaccinated or else they are not going to be working at the Town if they have reasons that are valid for not having a vaccine.'

'The two big grounds from a human rights perspective that have been allowed in terms of the vaccination, one is the medical status of people. If you have a medical condition that does not permit you to take the vaccine and you have a medical record to support that, that has been respected by institutions and all bodies that are now requiring a mandatory vaccination. The second one has been on religious grounds. If people are coming to you with the religious ground to say our religion does not permit a vaccination, we have seen a smaller number of this, but it still existed and it still continues to exist, so that is another ground in terms of the human rights side where people can come to you and say, 'Well, we work at the Town and we would like to continue to work with the Town. We have a religious restriction on which we're unable to take a vaccine.' The equity piece really comes into the piece of fairness. Are we being fair with our policies? If we have a vaccination for all policy, of course the exemption has to exist for people who are not able to take the vaccine. We cannot fire someone when they are not medically able to take the vaccine. We can't fire someone when they say they belong to a religion or a faith that does not allow them to take the vaccine.'

While Councillor Gallo said he wasn't 'entirely sure' that the vaccine policy aligns with those principles, Mayor Tom Mrakas said that valid exemptions are part of the policy.

'I think that it is about providing health and safety for all our employees while being fairer, equitable and inclusive,' said Mayor Mrakas, adding he would like Dr. Jalal's opinion on the policy in full.

'We talked about culture and we have heard it around the table with culture, and how do you change culture?' he continued. 'I love the fact that the number one on the list is commitment from the top and I think it is so important that people need to understand culture does not change unless there is that commitment from the top. Ultimately, I believe diversity and inclusion strategies are not just simply a task on a list, to be completed and forgotten about. They should be and will be an integral part of our community, woven into the fabric of our community, as we go forward towards a more positive, inclusive future?I am excited about us moving forward in the direction we are.'

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter