

York Region municipalities take collaborative approach on inclusion

By Brock Weir

The Municipal Election is over and now it is time to get back to business creating a more inclusive York Region.

Meetings are set to resume this month in the development of an action plan surrounding the York Region Inclusion Charter, a Charter Aurora Council formally adopted at the last Council meeting before Aurorans went to the polls.

The Inclusion Charter for York Region is a document drafted in consultation with all nine York Region Municipalities and various stakeholders, including school boards, that serves as a plan on how ?embrace all dimensions of diversity.?

?It is grounded in the belief that our greatest strength is the ability to bring people together to build a welcoming community that celebrates and values the differences and contributions of everyone,? said Techa van Leeuwen, Aurora's Director of Corporate Services, in a report to Council. ?The Inclusion Charter is the result of extensive consultations and discussions with individuals, employees, organizations, boards, councils and groups. Community consultations in 2015, 2016 and 2017 informed the Charter model, with over 1,800 people and organizations part of the Inclusion Charter's development.

?Local consultations in Aurora include a community focus group discussion held at Aurora Town Hall in June of 2016 and a booth at the 2017 Aurora Street Festival with representatives asking questions and obtaining feedback about inclusion. Consultations were conducted using a variety of engagement tactics to reach a broad range of groups and perspectives, including pop-up booths at community events and festivals in all nine local municipalities, online surveys, social media and targeted community conversations with groups such as Parents & Friends of Lesbians and Gals (Pflag) and the Chippewas of Georgina Island Band Council.

Engagement efforts concluded with consultation with the Community Partnership Council and twenty individual interviews with each member organization of the Municipal Diversity & Inclusion Group.?

Following Council's endorsement in September, Aurora is signed onto the principles within the Charter, which reads as follows:

?The Inclusion Charter of York Region is a community initiative that brings together businesses, community organizations, municipalities, police services, hospitals, school boards, conservation authorities, and agencies with a common commitment to create an inclusive environment with equality for all who work, live and play here. Together, our organizations share the vision of York Region as a welcoming and inclusive community where diversity is celebrated and where everyone can develop to their full potential and participate freely in society and live with respect, dignity and freedom from discrimination. The Charter reflects an evolving approach in support of existing Federal and Provincial legislation that promotes human rights and accessibility. By endorsing this Charter, we affirm our commitment to inclusion, whereby all people feel they belong and have access to the same opportunities.?

For Aurora's part, the endorsement commits the municipality to ?taking action to achieve the Charter's vision in our organization and community we serve. The Charter supports the Town of Aurora's vision to promote diverse neighbourhoods to create a vibrant community. The Town celebrates its growing and diverse population as a source of strength, vitality and economic opportunities and is committed to creating an inclusive organization that attracts and retains passionate employees, promotes innovation and provides an excellent customer experience.?

The Charter received the unanimous support of Councillors sitting at the table in the last meeting, with Councillors Harold Kim and Wendy Gaertner speaking in support of the measure.

?York University is the project lead in one research called Building Resilience in Cities and what they're doing is researching how immigrants settle in Canada and looking to use their experience in how we can carry over that type of successful immigrant experience,? said Councillor Kim. ?Kudos to York Region [for commissioning] a study based on Statistics Canada and they used what is called a longitudinal immigration database, which looks at information from Citizenship and Immigration Canada as well as tax returns from the CRA and it helps us to understand the contributions immigrants are making in York Region and, at the same time, they are trying to see how they can leverage these same immigrants for new immigrants who are coming on board.

?This isn't just a wishy-washy charter.?

Added Councillor Gaertner: ?I think this is a wonderful initiative and?it embraces all dimensions of diversity. I don't remember seeing an initiative like this that was so far-reaching and that is great!?

Aurora's Accessibility Advisor will be Aurora's representative in action planning this month, according to Ms. van Leeuwen.