

Committee will look at Council Code of Conduct

By Bill Rea

A committee is to be formed to look at the Code of conduct for members of Caledon Council, and it will be reporting to the councillors in office after this fall's elections.

That motion was approved recently after a lengthy and sometimes heated debate at committee.

Councillor Johanna Downey had put forth the motion calling on staff to review the Code and come up with recommendations to have its provisions in better alignment with the expectations of overall respectful workplace conduct.

The preamble of her motion stated the current Code is general in nature, and lacks specific guidelines regarding appropriate conduct in various situations.

The motion also calls for guidelines covering such things as the use of social media, hosting and attending community meetings and relations between councillors and staff.

This came after the Town Integrity Commissioner John E. Fleming had ruled in favour of Councillors Barb Shaughnessy and Annette Groves in light of allegations they had violated the Code.

Shaughnessy's husband Tim Forster addressed committee, agreeing there is a need to review the Code (Shaughnessy said she had nothing to do with the preparation of his remarks).

"But this is not the time or the motion to do it," he remarked, adding it was an attempt on the part of Downey to try a police behaviour beyond a councillor's control, including activity on social media.

He also said the motion was in response to Downey's disappointment at the Fleming's findings regarding Shaughnessy and Groves.

He said the Code needs to reflect balance between the freedom to communicate and diversity of opinion.

"This is not the tone of this motion," he said.

Forster also said there is a social media outlet in Caledon that is operating as a "private propaganda machine for a particular view on council."

He added one blogger has been creating posts that are defamatory to some councillors. He said it would be nice if such activity could be policed, but he didn't think that was the intent of the motion.

"My sense is that this motion's intent is to muzzle councillors," he remarked.

Forster suggested councillors concentrate on serving their constituents and not attacking each other, and let Fleming come up with recommendations on how to update the Code. He added if councillors would stop filing charges against each other, that would give him time to look at the Code.

He also said the new council will be hiring a new Integrity Commissioner, and he understood the rules will require that person to be a lawyer. He said Fleming should be able to look at it, with the recommendations being considered by the new council and a lawyer as Integrity Commissioner.

Town Clerk Carey deGorter said the role of the Integrity Commissioner is due to expand next year, but added there's nothing saying that person has to be a lawyer.

Councillor Rob Mezzapelli said he does his best to monitor his conduct with staff, his peers and the public, adding the levels councillors hold up for themselves should follow them outside the Council Chambers.

Downey denied she was dissatisfied with Fleming's ruling, adding she has great respect for him.

But she said there are technical aspects that the current Code doesn't address.

"Maybe it's just time to look at it," she said.

Mezzapelli said he supported a review, and said Forster made a good point of using Fleming as a means to conduct it.

DeGorter told him Council could ask Fleming to take on the task, but she wouldn't offer an opinion on whether that would be the best way to proceed. Fleming would have to be asked that.

Mezzapelli commented that if there is going to be a review, it has to be fulsome and effective.

Groves had problems with the intent of the motion.

"I see my name written all over it, and Councillor Shaughnessy's name written all over it, indirectly," she declared, adding the public has lost confidence in this council.

She agreed there is a need to review the Code, but added it has become the source of a lot of drama on Council, with some members using it to bully, intimidate and discredit others, and using it as a way to stop free speech.

"It's not something that I want to be governed by," she declared, adding it should be up to the next Council to review it. She put forth the motion to have the matter referred back to staff so a committee can be formed.

Downey said she was happy with that, pointing out it would accomplish what she had set out to do.

Mayor Allan Thompson agreed, pointing out there are legislative changes from the province coming down on this in the fall, and not all the implications are known.

Mezzapelli was upset at suggestions there was an attempt to muzzle free speech.

"It's a horrible statement to make and totally untrue," he declared.

DeGorter told Thompson this work won't be done by the fall, pointing out staff will be very busy running the elections.

Councillor Jennifer Innis supported the referral, stating the work to be done is important.

Innis also said she took offence at the suggestions the original motion was aimed at muzzling people.

"You don't have to be friends with everybody, but you must be kind. You must be respectful," she said is something she tells her children. "This issue is not about you."