

Council sidelines Regional Prayer

By Bill Rea

If Peel Regional councillors want to pray before the start of their meetings, they're going to have to do it quietly.

Regional council last Thursday voted to stop reciting the Regional Prayer, although the motion, put forth by Brampton Mayor Linda Jeffrey, left the option of a moment of silence being observed, at the discretion of the Chair.

The move came on the heels of a ruling by the Supreme Court of Canada the previous day that the municipal council in Saguenay, Quebec, cannot open its council meetings with a prayer.

Mississauga Mayor Bonnie Crombie observed that her City council has been in the habit of reciting the Lord's Prayer, but that was going to stop.

'We will be abiding by the Supreme Court decision,' she said.

Mayor Allan Thompson was far from pleased with the idea.

'Canada was built on a Christian law that we've brought in,' he said. 'We've showed toleration to all faiths.'

He added being able to recite the prayer is part of the country's fundamentals. 'I'm not compromising them,' he declared.

Crombie countered she's a Christian and a Catholic, but she couldn't go along with Thompson's position.

'In this vote, you are signalling that you are willing to fight the Supreme Court and undertake the financial costs,' she said.

She also said if the prayer continues, there's a good chance someone will challenge it. Director of Legal Services and Regional Solicitor Patrick O'Connor said in that event, it will be hard to sustain the practice.

'We have to respect the laws of the land, and the Supreme Court has spoken,' Crombie declared.

'I would put these people to the test,' Brampton Councillor John Sprovieri remarked, suggesting they wait and see if there's a challenge.

He pointed out the Regional Prayer is not like the Lord's Prayer. 'It's a very generic prayer,' he commented, adding it doesn't place one denomination above another.

The Prayer, which has been recited at Regional council meetings for more than 30 years, asks for 'perception and patience that justice, truth and honesty may be evident in our planning and governing.'

'Save us from a parochialism that divides and so create in us a desire for progress and responsible action,' it goes on to say.

'Let's challenge anyone to come here and challenge us,' Sprovieri urged. 'I don't see who's going to do that.'

Mississauga Councillor Jim Tovey said he could recite a prayer to himself if he chose, but he didn't see taking the risk of spending taxpayers' money in a fruitless fight.

'Sometimes, we have to stand up for the right thing,' Thompson countered.

Councillor Annette Groves called the situation unfortunate.

'The Supreme court does not respect the right of everyone who lives in the country,' she said.

'Generic prayer sucks,' Mississauga Councillor Carolyn Parrish remarked. 'I'm not a particularly religious person, but that prayer's terrible.'

She pointed to the need to separate places of worship from places of work, adding council is there to make laws and uphold them, so it would be hypocrisy to defy the highest court in the country.

Sprovieri pointed to requirements that Muslims be provided space and time in work places and schools to pray five times a day, and he wondered about that double standard.

'I respect the will of the majority of council,' Thompson said later.

He couldn't say if Caledon council will follow the same path as the Region (all five Regional representatives from Caledon voted against the motion). He said the court ruling will have to be studied, and due diligence applied.

'I think there's bigger fish to fry,' he said.

Although she didn't take part in the debate, the matter came up Saturday morning, as Councillor Jennifer Innis addressed a community round table, hosted by the House on the Rock Church in Caledon East.

She pointed out that everybody has different faiths.

'For me, it was an affirmation of my oath,' she commented, adding councillors should be basing their decisions on the greater good.

'For me every Thursday, it was a reminder of why we were there.'