

Councillors not in breach of Code of Conduct, Integrity Commissioner finds

By Bill Rea

Allegations of Code of Conduct violations against two Caledon councillors have been thrown out, but feelings were still running high at last week's committee meetings.

John E. Fleming, Caledon's integrity commissioner, ruled in a decision dated Dec. 18 that Councillors Annette Groves and Barb Shaughnessy had not been in breach of the regulations. The complaints had been filed in October by Mayor Allan Thompson. As well, there was another complaint filed in November by a member of the public that Fleming did not identify.

The complaints involved a community meeting hosted by Groves in October which Shaughnessy attended, at which there was discussion of an offer from a south Albion resident to donate land to be used for a health care facility.

Fleming's report stated the offer has been the subject of continued negotiation between the owner and the Town, with a staff report going to councillors in the fall.

"All of the documentation submitted to Town Council at both its General Committee meeting of Sept. 26 and the Council on October 10, and the discussion of it was and remains confidential, with consideration held at all times "in camera," the report stated. Fleming noted the matter was raised at the meeting Groves hosted by a member of the public. Thompson was concerned that confidential information had been disclosed at the meeting and in subsequent social media communications.

The offer of the land from Bryan Wilson, Fleming stated, while still subject to negotiations, has not been confidential or secret.

"I understand that the property owner from time to time may have discussed the offer made with various individuals," he reported.

Fleming also observed planning and land-use considerations are currently before the Ontario Municipal Board (OMB), and accepted the considerations facing the Town on the land donation are complex.

Fleming's report was included in the agenda of last week's committee meetings, which resulted in some heated discussions.

Shaughnessy's husband Tim Forster came forth with a delegation charging the process had been a waste of time, resources and money, adding it was an abuse of the power of the Mayor's Office.

"This has not been fun," he declared.

He also called the complaints "desperate politics."

"It's an election year, and this mayor and certain members of council have lost the faith of Caledon residents," Forster declared, adding their recourse has been to "attack the councillors that people know are working for them."

Thompson replied that it's his job to respond to the concerns of councillors, so he asked Fleming if there had been a breach. He found none, and Thompson said he reported to council what had happened.

"As far as I'm concerned, the book is closed," he said.

Groves remarked that she was glad to see this issue coming to a close,

"I think this was a serious issue," Shaughnessy remarked. "I think a lot of things are done without a lot of thought and process in it."

She added that in such a process, a leader should seek to learn the truth and talk to the involved parties

Fleming's report said Grove's community meeting was held Oct. 23, and Thompson filed the complaint Oct. 25. Shaughnessy said she had been at Town Hall all day Oct. 24, but Thompson never talked to her, and she said the decision to file the complaint was made without listening to all sides.

Shaughnessy also said there had been a Nov. 7 meeting between herself, Fleming, Thompson and Groves, which lasted more than an hour, and Fleming had indicated that confidential information about the negotiations had not been divulged. She also said Fleming had told Thompson this process was a waste of taxpayers' money.

She said the Mayor had agreed to withdraw the complaint.

"We all shook hands," she said.

She also said Thompson had changed his mind about withdrawing the complaint Nov. 10.

Shaughnessy charged this matter was a desperate attempt to ruin her reputation in an election year. "It was nothing more than what I would term a witch hunt," she declared, also charging that taking measures like this against councillors also attacks the wards they represent.

"Your actions have been detrimental to the people of Caledon," she added.

She also called the issue a case of "bullying."

Councillor Johanna Downey said there is a process in place, and the mayor used it because it was his job.

Groves countered that in all her years on council she had never seen complaints to the integrity Commissioner.

"We're big girls and boys," she said, adding when they got into politics, they knew they were subject to criticism.

She also thought the complaints were "politically driven," adding the need for a medical facility is not political. "It is not a luxury, but it is a necessity," she added.

Groves also said it was unfortunate that tax dollars had to be spent on this investigation.

"Residents don't expect us to be quibbling," she said. "They expect us to work."