

Councillors vote to open door at Service Caledon

By Bill Rea

The door could soon be opening up at Town Hall.

Caledon councillors, sitting in committee Tuesday, accepted a motion from Councillor Barb Shaughnessy, to have the door between the cafeteria and the main atrium opened during business hours.

The decision is to go to the next Council meeting, scheduled for Jan. 30, for ratification.

The door has been closed since the start of the year as part of the new Service Caledon initiative.

The Service Caledon counter is just inside the main door at Town Hall, and people entering the building are being greeted by staff at the counter, and asked if they need assistance. Those who say they know where they are going are allowed to pass through the door, while those who are not sure are offered further help. The aim of the program is to aid people from their first point of contact in the facility, but some councillors raised concerns that it gave the impression that Town Hall is closed to the public.

Tuesday's agenda included an update on the program from General Manager of Strategic Initiatives David Arbuckle, in which he reported positive feedback so far.

He said the idea for Service Caledon came from the Council Workplan, which directed staff to improve customer service. People at the counter are currently getting information regarding things like taxes, public works, recreation, Town events, marriage licences, burial permits, water samples, etc., and Arbuckle's report said staff expects the number of services available at the counter will increase as the processes are reviewed.

'Town Hall remains a building open to the public and access to Council/committee meetings is not affected,' the report stated.

It added a consultation room is now available near the counter, enabling services to be provided in a quiet and confidential setting.

Arbuckle reported an increase in its use has been noted as the days have gone by. It had been used twice the first week, but the figure was up to three to five times per day by the end of the second week.

The report said there had been more than 20 positive comments.

There have also been four negative comments, which he stated have been addressed directly.

Shaughnessy said she was approached by a man at last Sunday's Winterfest celebrations, wondering if Town Hall was going to be called 'Fort Knox,' adding the locked door tells people, 'We're not open for business.'

She added that while she had approved of the idea of Service Caledon, she had not realized that was going to mean the door was to be closed.

Shaughnessy added some sort of signage directing people to the counter could accomplish the goals of the program, suggesting the word 'Reception' at the counter would give people a better idea of the services available there.

She also said one resident had asked if there had been a bomb threat at the Town, and if this was the reaction to it.

'I'm not wearing it,' she declared. 'I would never think of locking anyone out.'

'The doors are locked, and people don't like it,' she added.

Councillor Annette Groves seemed to think Service Caledon was a great idea, but she was also concerned about comments she said she was hearing from the public.

'They thought it was unwelcoming,' she remarked, adding Town Hall has been paid for by taxpayers.

She also agreed some people do wander about Town Hall, commenting that could be addressed by better signage.

'It's harsh and not welcoming,' Councillor Gord McClure declared. 'I don't think we want people to just pay their taxes and get lost.'

He was also concerned that Council wasn't consulted.

'Something this important should have come to Council first,' he declared.

Councillor Nick deBoer observed that people usually don't like change, adding this is a matter of telling people about what's going on. He also said Arbuckle looked into what's done in other municipalities.

Shaughnessy countered she was recently at Mississauga City Hall. There was a reception desk, where she said she was going to the Mayor's Office. She was directed to an elevator, went to the designated floor and walked into the office without any interference.

'You don't need a locked door for a person greeting the public,' she observed. 'Talk to people first. Don't lock doors. It's not needed.'

Councillor Doug Beffort agreed this doesn't seem to be a security issue. He said better signage would help with the effort, adding he has a fundamental problem with locking doors. On the other hand, he said he has not had to use his swipe card to get through the door, commenting there has always been someone there who let him in.

?I don't want the door locked unless there's a reason to lock the door,? he said.

Town CAO Mike Galloway confirmed the program was called for in the Council Workplan, adding it came about through direction from Council to staff to look at services. He added one of the first things he heard when he arrived at the Town was customers were not receiving proper service, as people were being passed from person to person. He also pointed out the first contact point was not being staffed by people who could answer many questions.

Arbuckle added two areas of concern were noted.

One was people seemed to have trouble finding their way around the building, and the other was the low percentage of people who seemed to have their issues resolved at the first point of contact.

He said staff is now equipped to address many issues at that first contact.

Galloway said that's a key point, noting there was a time when five per cent of people got what they needed at the first point of contact. They were able to get that up to about 10 per cent, but he pointed out that still wasn't very good public service, as he said the other 90 per cent had to have three or four interactions with staff before they got what they wanted. From the information they have now, Galloway said close to 60 per cent of issues are now being resolved at first contact.

?You've got to give it a little bit of time,? Galloway said, while he agreed the system should be revisited.

Galloway also said he's spent some time near the counter to see how many issues are being resolved there.

?I'm pleasantly surprised,? he said. ?Quite frankly, it's exceeded the expectations.?

Councillor Rob Mezzapelli applauded the idea of Service Caledon, but like others, he wondered about the need for locking the door, assuming it was not a security issue. He suggested it was the engagement with staff at the counter who are helping people get what they need, not the locked door.

Groves also wondered about the connection between the counter and the door, as she said people are getting the perception the door is locked to keep them out.

?It's just not a good perception out there for people,? she remarked.

Councillor Jennifer Innis, recalling her days as executive assistant to Mayor Marolyn Morrison, said directing people to where they needed to go took about an hour of her average work day.

?I understand the concerns,? she said, ?but I would like to give it a little more time.?