

Editorial ? Region hasn't got a prayer

In the great scheme of things, it wasn't that big a deal.

Indeed, given how secular our society is supposed to be, it was probably to be expected.

The Supreme Court of Canada ruled unanimously recently that the municipal council in Saguenay, Quebec, cannot open its council meetings with a prayer. Municipalities in this part of the country have lost little time announcing they will abide by the ruling, including Peel Region.

The issue came up April 16, with Brampton Mayor Linda Jeffrey putting forth a motion calling for a halt of what is commonly known as the "Regional Prayer" before meetings, but it was a split vote, with all of Caledon's representatives voting in favour of retaining the prayer.

The compelling argument in favour of shelving the prayer was practicality. There is the concern, articulated by Mississauga Mayor Bonnie Crombie, confirmed by Regional Solicitor Patrick O'Connor, that someone might raise a fuss about the prayer being recited, and if it results in a legal challenge, the Region would have very little to back up its position. As Crombie put it, "the Supreme Court has spoken."

The other argument, which we would argue is much weaker, is the concept that there must be separation between church and state. That means citizens should not be subjected to religious practices with which they do not agree. While we certainly agree with the notion, we would suggest a counter argument is possible, namely the courts should not be interfering in the traditional observances of citizens who also happen to be duly-elected officials simply because it has religious overtones. How soon will it be that a municipal councillor will be banned from wishing a constituent Merry Christmas?

The really bothersome part is the Regional Prayer is scarcely a proclamation of any faith. It is a brief, generic statement that has been recited at the start of Regional council meetings for more than 30 years, which calls on councillors to show "perception and patience," while avoiding parochialism.

If you're having trouble figuring out what's wrong with that, so are we.

Not surprisingly, there were a number of views expressed at the Regional council table.

"Generic prayer sucks," declared Mississauga Councillor Carolyn Parrish.

But Mayor Allan Thompson seemed almost angry, arguing that being able to recite a prayer is part of the fundamentals upon which this country was founded.

Brampton Councillor John Sprovieri seemed almost hoping for a challenge, treating the possibility as a dare. And Councillor Jennifer Innis likened it as a reminder of why councillors are there.

"For me, it was an affirmation of my oath," she said, discussing the matter a couple of days later.

We could understand the concern if it was a prayer that put one faith or denomination above another. The Lord's Prayer would be an example.

Indeed, Caledon councillors used to recite the Lord's Prayer before their meetings. That changed in the early 1990s, when they, for the most part, switched to a modified version of the Regional Prayer. It's still recited to this day (at least for now). At Tuesday's meeting, councillor Doug Beffort recited the prayer, although he edited out any religious references, commenting later that under the circumstances, it fit with his conscience. Thompson also said the Town has not taken an official position on the matter, stating it's been left up to "council's discretion."

There is the occasional exception to the prayer that's read at the town. At the April 14 meeting, Beffort read a prayer that had been composed in tribute to the late former councillor Richard Whitehead.

And we are left to wonder what's wrong with that, and whether the courts gone too far.