

Peel Region backs smoke-free movie policies

By Bill Rea

Not only do Peel Regional councillors want to discourage young people from taking up smoking, they want to prevent them from seeing it on the big screen.

Regional councillors quickly accepted a staff recommendation recently to endorse five key policy actions recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Ontario Coalition for Smoke-Free Movies.

WHO developed specific policy actions to support smoke-free movies. Forty organizations in Ontario have endorsed them, according to the staff report.

The policies set out to require strong anti-smoking ads prior to movies that contain tobacco imagery, adult ratings for movies with tobacco imagery, certification that there was no financial or other kind of inducement to depict tobacco, no identification of tobacco brands and make media productions with smoking ineligible for public subsidy.

Caledon Councillor Richard Paterak said he was shocked to learn that some reality film producers have taken payment to have cigarettes including in movies.

‘It’s devious,’ he charged, pointing out these efforts are aimed at vulnerable people.

The staff report pointed out that ‘living tobacco-free’ is a term-of-council priority as well as a program priority of the public health department for this decade.

The report cited statistics, from 2011, that roughly 19 per cent of youth between Grades 7 and 12 have admitted to ‘trying a cigarette,’ and that a third of young people who start smoking become regular smokers by the time they finish high school. They added the highest rate of smoking is among males between the ages of 19 and 29. About 30 per cent of them are identified as current smokers.

‘Exposure to tobacco imagery in movies is one of the risk factors that influences youth tobacco use,’ the report stated. ‘Despite legislation and policy restrictions on tobacco marketing in entertainment media, tobacco imagery remains pervasive in both youth-rated and adult-rated movies.’

The report pointed out there was an agreement reached in 1998 between tobacco companies and American states attorneys to limit the promotion of tobacco to youth, and that led to a reduction in the number of tobacco images seen in movies. But enforcement of that agreement declined in the years that followed, and the report stated the number of tobacco images in youth-rated movies doubled between 2010 and 2012.

‘Smoking is made to appear glamorous in movies,’ the report stated. ‘Characters that smoke are appealing to youth as they are often portrayed as attractive, sociable and affluent. In reality, the typical smoker has more health problems and is of lower socioeconomic status compared to on-screen smokers.’

The report added the prevalence of smoking depicted in movies is greater than what exists in society.

‘It’s rather simple, the more children and youth are exposed to tobacco imagery with scenes of glamorous movie stars smoking, the more likely they are going to try smoking,’ said Medical Officer of Health Dr. Mowat. ‘Most alarming is the prevalence of smoking in films rated for youth, including animated films.’

‘Advocating for policies to protect children and youth from the influence of the tobacco industry and continued prevention initiatives are critical in decreasing the rates of youth smoking,’ he added. ‘Empowering parents and youth with knowledge and awareness about the serious consequences of tobacco imagery in films will build support for policy change.’

The staff report stated the action in favour of smoke-free movies has become a world-wide movement. WHO ‘has set up guidelines on tobacco advertising and sponsorship. The Ontario Coalition for Smoke-Free Movies was formed in 2010. Its member organizations include the Canadian Cancer Society, Heart and Stroke Foundation of Ontario and Ontario Lung Association. As well, it said several public health units have supported these measures.