

Security at Town Hall raised in Council debate

By Bill Rea

The door at Town Hall that was locked as part of the Service Caledon arrangement has been unlocked, and it's going to stay that way.

Caledon Council Tuesday night ratified the decision made two weeks ago at committee, although it took a considerable amount of sometimes heated debate before the decision was reached, and it wasn't unanimous. Councillors Johanna Downey and Jennifer Innis opposed the majority.

Possible security concerns came up in the discussion.

The door separating the entrance area and cafeteria at Town Hall from the Emil Kolb Atrium, which leads to the rest of the building, including various departments, the Town Council Chambers and the Mayor's Office, was closed and locked earlier this year. The door had been closed 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 were being greeted by staff at the counter, and asked if they needed assistance. Those who said they knew where they were going are allowed to pass through the door, while those who were not sure were offered further help. The aim of the program was 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. This was despite assurances from Town staff that was not the case.

'Town Hall remains a building open to the public and access to Council/committee meetings is not affected,' stated a staff report that went to committee two weeks ago.

Although the committee decisions had not yet been ratified, the door was unlocked the day after it was made.

But that caused concern for Caledon OPP Inspector Ryan Carothers. The detachment commander told Council Tuesday night he had been at Town Hall for a meeting early in January and was pleased to see the locked door, considering it an enhancement to the security of the facility. He was in the building again in the last two weeks and noticed the door was unlocked, and started asking around.

He pointed out Town Hall is connected to the Ontario Court of Justice next door, and part of his job is to ensure security at that facility.

Carothers said there is an obligation to protect the public, asking why wait for something to happen. He added it's up to Council to balance the need for security with public right to accessibility.

'What we're talking about here is sensible precautions,' he declared, asking if it would be known who's in the building if it ever had to be evacuated.

'You're not limiting access,' he said. 'You're controlling access.'

Councillor Barb Shaughnessy reminded Carothers he made a report to Council late last year, and there was no mention of security issues at Town Hall.

He replied by recommending a security review of the building.

'I like to think this is a safe community,' Councillor Gord McClure remarked, adding he could understand the need for security around the court facility. 'That's where the bad guys are.'

But he wondered when the last time there had been an incident at Town Hall.

'We do not need to lock the building up,' he declared.

Councillor Doug Beffort said he had not heard any concerns expressed about security issues, getting confirmation from Carothers that there are no locked doors between Town Hall and the courthouse.

Carothers told him the detachment is planning a security review of the court facility this year.

'Thank you for bringing your concerns forward,' Mayor Allan Thompson told Carothers.

Former councillor Ian Sinclair told Council the idea of improving customer service is a good one, but he also pointed out Caledon was judged Canada's safest community four years in a row. He wondered why the door was locked without notice, likening the move to creating a 'Fort Town Hall.'

'Locking doors is offensive to Caledon residents,' he said, adding it tells them they must be excluded from the building with no reason given.

He said there was no indication staff consulted Council before going ahead with this move.

'All of this is unacceptable in a democracy,' Sinclair declared.

Bolton resident Sherry Brioschi also had problems with people being denied access to the Atrium, which she referred to as a 'nice

place.?

She had also gone through the reports and documentation, and said she saw no mention of any security concerns.

?What is warranting this controlled environment?? she asked.

Brioschi also said there are other ways to improve customer service, such as having people be greeted by a person when they phone Town Hall, rather than a recording. She added better signage in the Atrium would help too.

?There are many ways of making exceptional public service, and locking doors is not one of them,? she declared.

Downey told her she didn't think there was much of a problem, pointing out a person telling the staff member behind the counter where they want to go is able to walk in.

Brioschi countered if Carothers' concerns are real, they should have been raised months ago.

?The world is a very wicket, wicket place, but I don't think we should be living in fear either,? she said.

Councillor Annette Groves was curious that if there were security concerns why Carothers was not consulted and why Council was not briefed.

General Manager of Strategic Initiatives David Arbuckle replied that staff had made it clear better customer service was the focus, not security. He added Carothers had gone before Council on his own initiative.

Groves stressed she supports better customer service and having a staffer at the front desk, but the locking of the door took her by surprise, along with a lot of other people. She also pointed out the Town has other buildings which people walk through and she had never heard of any security concerns.

Councillor Doug Beffort moved the matter be referred to staff to study the comments from the public, Council and police. And he suggested the door remain open until that report comes.

That motion was defeated.

Downey supported the referral.

?I don't think that controlled access is an affront to democracy,? she commented, pointing out there is controlled access to elementary schools. Downey added she has four children in elementary school, and she sees the need for security in that setting. She said people in the area of Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut thought they lived in a safe community until a gunman got into the school in December 2012 and killed 20 children and six adults.

?I think it's a waste of taxpayers' money,? Shaughnessy remarked, observing if there's a risk seen at Town Hall, insurance rates on the building could increase.

Shaughnessy also wondered why Carothers had been at the meeting.

?Somebody told him to show up,? she said. ?I know he didn't show up here on his own volition.?

She later said it was Thompson who told Carothers to attend.

?Mr. Mayor, I was told you told him,? she stated. ?I was told that's how Mr. Carothers got here.?

Thompson replied that Carothers had come to his office and asked about the situation, and said he had concerns. The mayor said he suggested Carothers take it up with CAO?Mike Galloway and staff, and he left it at that.

Carothers had left the meeting shortly after his delegation, which was one of the first items on Tuesday's agenda, so he missed the subsequent discussions on the motion from committee. Attempts to get comments from him Wednesday morning were unsuccessful.

Groves complained things were working backwards on this issue. She said there had been a democratic vote to keep the door open. She also had a problem with the references to Sandy Hook.

?This is not a school,? she charged. ?It's a public building.?

Groves also accused Downey of laughing at her.

?You need to have respect for other members here,? she charged.

Innis said there was an incident some years ago when a man entered Town Hall with a gas can. She said the building had to be evacuated.

Innis said it was fair to have staff look at the security question. She also wondered if there was no such study and something happened at Town Hall, whether there would be any liability.