

South Algonquin vaccination policy passed

By Mike Riley

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

At their Sept. 1 meeting, South Algonquin Township council voted to pass a vaccination policy, under new bylaw no. 21-666. They moved forward with this policy to ensure a safe workplace and to prevent the spread of COVID-19, a highly infectious viral disease with a range of symptoms mild to severe, within that workplace and throughout the community through contact with constituents and the community at large. After much discussion, council voted to adopt this vaccination policy for South Algonquin.

Mayor Jane Dumas brought up the resolution to pass the municipality's vaccine policy, bylaw no. 21-666, at the Sept. 1 meeting, and it passed the first and second reading. They did this under the Municipal Act, s. 10 (2) paragraph six that stipulates that council has authority to pass bylaws respecting the 'health safety and well being of persons' which includes staff and members of the public who interact with staff. They also took this step under the Occupational Health and Safety Act, which states that an employer is required to take all reasonable steps in the circumstances to protect the workers. After being brought forward for a third reading, Dumas invited discussion from council on this bylaw.

Councillor Joe Florent thought the bylaw was redundant because he thought the province was taking it out of municipal hands.

'They're going to enact some workplace health and safety guidelines concerning COVID-19. I think it's going to be taken out of our hands by the province or maybe by the federal government and I think at some point we have to decide whether we believe the government that vaccinations work. If they do, there's no need to segregate, there's no need to wear masks. Or if masks work, they work, so why pass a law saying that. The doctors are telling us that we can transmit the virus whether we're vaccinated or not so in that respect there's no difference between the people that are vaccinated or have not been vaccinated. There's no added risk by working with an employee that hasn't been vaccinated. That employee may be at risk personally but there's no actual risk of it being transmitted from them if you're been vaccinated and you believe that the vaccinations work,' he says.

Councillor Bongo Bongo conceded that as Florent alluded to, there may in fact be some provincially mandated workplace guidelines that may appear in the near future.

'However, as Bryan [Martin, the township's CAO/clerk-treasurer] has been keeping us up to date, I can still see the benefit of implementing a vaccination policy now ahead of any mandated provincial legislation. Simply because there's a risk, a workplace safety hazard potentially, and we're in the 'wild west' of COVID-19 policy making at the moment,' he says.

Bongo told council that when he reviewed the policy, he thought it was very reasonable, but that there was a contradiction in it. He suggested amendments to the policy versus allowing fully vaccinated people to remove their masks indoors. He suggested having everyone wear masks to maintain privacy and anonymity of those who are not vaccinated or of unknown status. He also suggested having biweekly antigen point of care tests for unknown status individuals, done privately to maintain anonymity.

'I'm curious to know what the rest of council thinks of this,' he says.

Dumas turned the floor over to Martin, who is an expert in human resources and the requirements of the municipality as an organization. He said they do allow for the possibility of antigen testing within the policy, and it would be a council decision if they want to do that. Renfrew County does have the tests available and Dr. Cushman confirmed to Martin that anyone who wants them would be able to procure them.

Martin also wanted to make a clarification with regard to provincial legislation. He said that on Aug. 24 the government passed a regulation 577/21 under the Reopening Ontario Act that gives Ontario's 38 medical officers of health the authority to mandate

vaccination policies in all workplaces. While he was not sure when they would use this authority to mandate these policies, he said it was good they were getting it done early and getting such a policy into place.

?So, if Dr. Cushman chose to enforce this tomorrow, we would have to implement one regardless of the outcome of today,? he says.

Dumas thanked Martin for his feedback and said that she thought it was expedient to go forward with it. She said it's a long document and it can be modified should there be changes that would impact it today that would come from provincial government or subsequently from Dr. Cushman. She said she'd prefer to go ahead with the vote, taking the recommendations of Councillor Bongo under advisement.

?I would like to know the township is covered right now by health and safety criteria with regard to COVID-19,? she says.

Councillor Richard Shalla asked about the status of the municipal office (which had been closed since Aug. 19 due to a case of COVID-19 within the community) and of township employees (some of whom he'd seen not wearing masks in township vehicles). Martin said that the office will be reopening Sept. 7 after monitoring the COVID-19 case and with feedback from the RCDHU, and that with regard to the employees not following COVID-19 protocols, he would be having a talk with Dave Gatley, the public works superintendent, who will then be speaking with said employees to ensure that the protocols are enforced.

Bongo had a question about employees that were not vaccinated or of unknown status and wanted to clarify that the reasons they were allowed not to be vaccinated were for health reasons or for creed. Martin replied that creed was the only thing under the legislation that would permit them not to get the vaccine, and health was definitely another reason for them not to be vaccinated.

?Those are legally the only two items for which we as an employer are required to accommodate our staff. Not believing in the vaccine and thinking COVID-19 is a hoax are not a good enough reason for us to exempt someone from the vaccine as an employer,? he says.

Florent made a final comment before the vote.

?I'll admit this is way out there, but I received my second vaccine on June 23 and I had a stroke on Aug. 23. I've been asked is there a connection and I don't have an answer. I doubt it but because of that slight little possibility I would not put my name to any legislation forcing people to have a vaccination,? he says.

Dumas thanked everyone for their comments and for the discussion and called the vote on the third reading of bylaw 21-666. Everyone voted in favour of the vaccination policy except Florent, who voted against it. Council then moved on with other business.