

Tudor and Cashel COVID-19 vaccination policy meets with some community criticism

By Mike Riley

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At their Dec. 7 meeting, Tudor and Cashel Township council passed their COVID-19 vaccination policy, which was missing both a provision for all employees to be vaccinated against the virus who are able to be and the implementation of a rapid testing regimen to ensure that employees that cannot be vaccinated due to health issues or religious beliefs are regularly testing negative for COVID-19. Councillor Bob Bridger was against the policy because of this, and several residents have emailed the township to protest these exclusions. Nancy Carrol, the clerk and treasurer, responds to these complaints.

Mayor Libby Clarke introduced the bylaw 2021-41, the township's COVID-19 policy to be discussed and voted on at their Dec. 7 council meeting. Bridger had some concerns with the policy with regard to the lack of inquiry into their staff's vaccination status (which would remain confidential) and the absence of any provision for rapid antigen testing for those who are not vaccinated. He thought that the testing provision was missing from the policy that he'd seen last month, and Carrol said that if that was so, it was not intentional, and that she'd already set up to get the rapid antigen tests and can proceed with this if council so desires.

Bridger said that he'd consulted the Georgian Bluffs COVID-19 policy, which Tudor and Cashel had based theirs on, and that they did indeed have a provision for testing every seven days. However, Clarke thought that the policy they were seeing that day was the same as the one they'd seen the previous month, and disagreed that it was missing that provision.

Clarke called for a vote on the motion to pass the COVID-19 policy bylaw and Bridger asked for a recorded vote, which deputy clerk and treasurer Sheryl Scott called. Council voted to pass the COVID-19 policy, with Bridger voting against it.

Resident Dave Hederson wrote a Dec. 10 email to council and a list of 16 fellow residents of the township about the decision of council not to mandate COVID-19 vaccinations or to implement rapid testing of staff, especially considering the new Omicron variant that has taken over as the dominant COVID-19 strain recently. Fellow resident Pat Stallaert said in a Dec. 11 email to council that he was also disappointed in the new policy passed at the Dec. 7 meeting.

"I would urge you and council to reconsider this very carefully. The last thing anyone should want is a localized outbreak causing a greater burden on our health and hospital system," he says.

A couple of other residents also emailed the township to express similar views.

However, while both Hederson and Stallaert criticized council for not wearing masks at the meeting on Dec. 7, with the exception of Councillor Bridger, everyone in the room was socially distanced, as seen on the live feed on Facebook, so that point is moot. Under Hastings Prince Edward Health Unit guidelines, while wearing a mask is vital when you are unable to be six feet apart, when social distancing is viable, as it was on Dec. 7, then the masking becomes a personal choice, but is not necessary. Clarke told The Bancroft Times that council and staff are masked when not seated at the council table, but that they were indeed socially distanced.

Carrol addressed the COVID-19 policy council passed on Dec. 7, saying that COVID-19 has created very passionate feelings throughout the province and that employers are trying to follow the regulations and legislation that is being drafted and is ever adapting to the information gained as the whole country progresses through this pandemic.

"The policy that council put in place directs the township that any employees required to be vaccinated through legislation and mandate from the federal and provincial governments will follow directives under those respective mandates," she says.

Carrol says that the township staff have been encouraged to become vaccinated, but the vaccination status of individual employees is not to be public knowledge. She says that although it seems some members of the community think they have a right to know the vaccination status of township employees, they do not.

?The council and staff of Tudor and Cashel have been directed to operate under the legislation and regulations that have been put in place by the province and the health unit. We adhere to Ontario regulation 364/20 [Rules for areas at Step 3 and at the roadmap exit step, under the Reopening Ontario Act, 2020, S.O.2020, c.17] and make efforts to ensure we provide a safe environment for staff and the public,? she says. ?The policy that was put in place may need to be reviewed as the COVID-19 situation evolves, and changes will be based on directives and mandates from the province and the federal government.?