

Bilingual signs would promote 'inclusivity' say Councillors and residents

By Brock Weir

Aurora signs should include at least 50 per cent of its text in either English or French in a bid to promote 'inclusivity,' according to Councillor Harold Kim.

Council last week approved looking into the feasibility of changing the Town's sign bylaw requiring business owners to have signs containing at least 50 per cent of its text in either of Canada's official languages.

The study, which will be carried out consulting local businesses, is the result of a motion from Councillor Kim, who said signs with text in neither English nor French could be seen as 'exclusionary.'

'In the end, this motion is about building community and there is a fundamental question that we're servicing here: What does a community look like and how do we want to get there?' he said. 'There seem to be three critical questions. One, does asking a business to have dual language signs necessarily represent intolerance? In my mind, on the contrary: it represents tolerance on both sides of the fence. Are businesses that deliberately install signs and have no English representation represent intolerance or insensitivity on the part of the business owner that they only care to service those who understand the sign? [And finally] is choosing [a language] that all parties understand unreasonable?'

It is not unreasonable for residents who spoke at Council last week in favour of going ahead with the study. In their view, ensuring English or French, for that matter -- on a sign is something that will unite the community.

'As someone who is undecided, yet leaning in favour of the law, I completely support the motion to look into this and encourage Aurora to do so,' said resident Kevin Riddell. 'I grew up in Scarborough so I do know what it is like to come from a multicultural community, especially one which does have certain regions with ethnic groups and languages. I believe that the proposal is not discriminatory. It is not exclusive. I believe it is inclusive as the overall goal is to ensure all members of the community feel included and welcomed throughout the entire Town of Aurora.'

'I realise that not everybody speaks English, but I believe that is too narrow a focus to look at it that way. I don't believe anyone here could name any language that everyone in Aurora speaks and I think English is our best chance to find common ground and find the commonality that will draw all of us together.'

Another resident citing the uniting factor was realtor Eric McCartney. For Mr. McCartney, it is a matter of fairness.

'It is my belief that every resident should be treated fairly and equally in order to receive the same opportunity,' said Mr. McCartney. 'This is what will not happen if we are unable to read the sign. Currently in Aurora some well-known national chains and contractors, independent stores, and even sales representatives are posting offers and services in languages unknown to me. Shouldn't every person be given the same opportunity? If signage such as this is allowed to continue in the future, is it possible that it may segregate areas in our Town?'

Speaking to Council in favour of his motion, Councillor Kim said this was an issue brought to him by a concerned resident. Looking at the matter, he said he came to believe English and French 'are fundamental characteristics of Canadian identity.'

Language is 'one of the human pillars that bond people' and having a common language is 'critical' in building communities.

'It can be said that it would not be welcoming to force businesses to include English on the sign but, on the flipside, to some passers-by and potential customers, having a sign that does not include English in it could be construed as exclusionary as well and this perspective, who is offending who, can come from both sides,' said Councillor Kim. 'For businesses, having a sign that includes one of the official languages can only be good for business.'

The motion to look into the matter received the unanimous support of Council, although Mayor Geoff Dawe was not at the meeting.

'It is not something I particularly would have thought of but I think it is important,' said Councillor Wendy Gaertner.

Added Councillor Michael Thompson: 'I certainly look forward to getting that report back from staff. I support the motion and I also think it is an opportunity for us to engage with the business community, the Chamber [of Commerce] and get that feedback from those business owners to get their perspective as well.'

'I share the perspective of the resident who spoke at Open Forum that really it is about being inclusive and being open for business for all, and I look forward to staff's report when it comes back later this term.'