

County Council makes changes to its staff vaccination policy

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Dufferin County Council has made changes to their vaccination policy for employees, which will now include a six-week suspension without pay leading to termination for those not vaccinated by Dec. 31.

During their meeting on Oct. 14, Warden Darren White brought forward concerns with the drafted policy council directed staff to proceed with following a special meeting on Oct. 7.

"Having had a week to think about the direction we're about to take, I became more and more concerned if that was the right course of action," said White. "Where we had discussed last week sort of was the end of the road scenario and I think that puts us in a position where we can't come back from."

Council previously directed staff to develop a "vaccinate or terminate" policy, which would see non-union employees of the county terminated if they remain unvaccinated by the end of the year.

White in his concerns spoke of the possibility to "destroy somebody's career" and "substantially change somebody's life" through the stricter policy. He also noted the daily changes regarding COVID-19 restrictions from upper levels of government.

"We're experiencing, I'll call it, a complete void of leadership from both upper levels of government with regards to COVID-19, with regards to consistency in policy and planning," said White.

White finally added the lack of knowledge towards the percentage of employees they'd be dealing with.

"I think it serves us well to have some sober second thoughts, and further discussion on the issue to see if we want to rethink the direction we gave last week and maybe come down somewhere closer in the middle," said White.

The "middle" consisted of adding a six week leave of absence or suspension preceding termination.

In the discussion some councillors shared they had "softened" their position since the last meeting while others questioned how effective the extension would be in getting unvaccinated employees vaccinated.

"I see our policy as a tool that will help us get at the last push for those who wish to be unvaccinated to take this seriously, and losing some pay I think that's a pretty big incentive for folks," said Coun. Janet Horner. "While I was firm on 'vaccinate or terminate' last week, I think I've softened a bit."

Coun. John Creelman said he was sticking with his original position but could be swayed with the notion of unpaid leave.

"The bottom line here is that everybody deserves to work in the safest possible workplace," said Creelman. "Beyond that we have an obligation to ensure that any member of the public who has contact with our employees should have the confidence of knowing that those employee are fully vaccinated."

Coun. Wade Mills, although saying he wouldn't oppose the leave of absence model, questioned the additional time.

"There is already a two-month period already built into the draft policy that's in front of us, between November 1st and December 31st and that gives every employee who has chosen not to be vaccinated as of this date an opportunity to comply," said Mills. "If

they're not going to comply within those two months is another six-weeks going to be enough. Are we just simply delaying the inevitable??

Both Coun. Bob Currie and Coun. Philip Rentsch spoke against the vaccination policy.

Rentsch noted the opening of larger venues such as stadiums and said to terminate employees would be going 'too far' and would be 'punitive' rather than 'reasonable'.

The new motion now puts a policy in place that will see unvaccinated staff and those unable to provide proof of exemption by Dec. 31, receive a six-week unpaid suspension. Those who remain unvaccinated following the suspension will then be terminated.

Employees are required to disclose their vaccination status or proof of exemption by Nov. 1 and those who don't will be required to attend education sessions and undergo rapid testing.

Coun. Currie was the only councillor to vote against the new policy, with Rentsch unable to vote due to leaving the meeting early.