

Melanchthon councillor serves mayor with libel notice

Written By **Paula Brown**

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

Tension is bubbling over within Melanchthon Township Council as a councillor takes potential legal actions against the mayor.

During their meeting last Thursday (Feb. 17), Melanchthon Mayor Darren White said himself and the township had been served a notice of libel by Coun. Margaret Mercer. The notice refers to posts made on White's Facebook and letters from residents in council agendas for public question period, stating they have been defamatory and malicious, resulting in Mercer suffering damages.

While issues for years have plagued the council process, the specific circumstance Melanchthon Council finds itself in stems back to a meeting in late January and has led to the resignation of the township's planning consultant and a council member.

Jan. 25 Special Meeting

Melanchthon Council scheduled a special meeting for Jan. 25 to discuss a by-law regarding diversified on-farm uses.

Coun. Mercer moved to adjourn and go back to council moments into the meeting as she questioned the version of the by-law as not being what council asked for.

She pointed to changed hours of operation, the distance to a non-participating lot line, and ensuring non-farm businesses have 70 per cent of the workable land as examples.

?In short this bylaw does not reflect the wishes of this Council,? she said.

The motion was seconded by then Coun. Wayne Hannon.

White noted that the bylaw would not be the final draft, and could still go back to Council for further discussion and refinement following the meeting. He added that he did not agree with adjourning.

Coun. James McLean said he also had concerns with the bylaw and would be fine with adjourning.

?What is currently being proposed is not something clearly the council is comfortable with,? he said. ?I'm not sure if there's value in talking about it in its present form.?

Deputy Mayor Dave Besley said he had no comment. During Melanchthon Council's Feb. 3 meeting, Besley declared a pecuniary interest.

Town Planner Resignation and White's Jan. 26 Post

Shortly after the Jan. 25 special meeting the township's planning consultant, Chris Jones, provided his notice of resignation effective immediately.

Speaking with the Free Press, White said he believes the questioning at the Jan. 25 meeting to be directly related to Jones' resignation.

?I think that was sort of the straw that broke the camel's back,? he said. ?I mean, you can only question integrity of your professional

staff so many times before they decide they're just going to leave.?

Without a town planner, Melanchthon is not able to accept any planning applications, and building permits are paused as they head into spring; a popular time for applications.

Following the meeting, White took to Facebook on Jan. 26 to provided residents with his comments on the previous night's meeting.

?I believe that the way this was handled by some on council was clearly pre planned and designed to make staff and our planner look like they have done something incorrectly,? he wrote in the post. ?Nothing could be farther from the truth. I want to be clear here, in my opinion, our staff and contract planner have always worked with the best interests of every resident of this municipality in mind.?

White added that the same proposed bylaw was presented in a committee of the whole meeting in October of 2021 and voted on to move to a public meeting on Nov. 4.

?There is no requirement that a new bylaw had to be passed at that meeting and what should have happened is that the public meeting proceed, gather all the input and comments from those attending and then use that data to make educated and informed decision on any proposed changes.?

White also said adjourning the meeting was an affront to the council process and an insult to residents.

Frustrated Residents

Melanchthon Council held their next regular council meeting of Feb. 3 where on the agenda a number of residents submitted letters regarding the special meeting. In the letters, residents shared their feelings on the adjournment of the meeting saying they were ?embarrassed?, ?disgusted?, ?appalled? and even calling the meeting itself a ?waste of everyone's time?.

Karren Wallace, a resident of Melanchthon and chair of grassroots organization NDACT, alleged in a letter that Mercer called the OPP to complain about her emails.

?She requested the OPP come to my home to tell me that she did not wish to receive any of my emails,? she wrote in the letter.

Wallace also shared on Facebook that the now former Coun. Hannon emailed her workplace on Feb.2 requesting a review of social media posts, specifically in regard to workplace harassment.

Hannon resigned from council on Feb. 15, effective immediately.

In his resignation letter Hannon wrote that while he intended to remain on council until Nov. 30 a ?recent opportunity has come forward and I am pursuing it.?

New Drama Old News

Discourse within Melanchthon Council had existed for quite some time.

In November of 2020, former council member David Thwaites resigned following accusation of ?hate'.

?I did not sign on to serve where my character and integrity would be attacked when all I have done is serve with character, hard work, and often sacrificing to fulfill my duties and responsibilities,? wrote Thwaites in his resignation letter.

Conflict has also been present between Mercer and White in the past.

In 2020, Mercer alleged White breached the code of conduct and submitted a complaint to the integrity commissioner. The integrity commissioner deemed White did not breach the code of conduct, with the investigation costing the township over \$2,000.

Election

The conflict within Melanchthon Council has come to a head as the township prepares for a municipal election in October. The current council members were all acclaimed to the council positions aside from the deputy mayor role, which was put to a vote.

White said he believes the issues council currently have will impact the election.

?It's going to make a lot more people take notice and as a result we'll have a lot more people putting their name in to run for Council,? he said.