
July 16, 2024

Mayor Martin Ritsma and Members of Council
Corporation of the City of Stratford
P.O. Box 818
Stratford, Ontario
N5A 6W1

Dear Mayor Ritsma and Members of Council,

Re: Policy # H.1.36 "Respectful Workplace Policy"

I am writing today with respect to a Notice of Motion put forward by Councillor Sebben at Council's meeting on July 8, 2024 as follows:

THAT the "Respectful Workplace Policy," policy number H.1.36, be suspended;
AND THAT staff provide options for the review of this policy to council for consideration at a future meeting.

What has transpired over the past three months beginning in early April should give reason for pause and perhaps even a reset for the Respectful Workplace Policy (RWP) and its implementation. Clearly, there is no disagreement with the need for respectful and civil discourse in matters involving the City of Stratford, its employees and its citizens. The current RWP would appear to reflect five other existing City policies related to workplace harassment, violence and various Codes of Conduct.

The stated Purpose of the RWP is to *"define behaviour that may create unsafe or harmful conditions that negatively impact the experience of people who work at the City, access City services and visit the workplace"*. Since the policy's definition of "City Workplace" includes *"all locations where the business of the organization is conducted"* it covers a broad spectrum of locations and situations. Some may be relatively benign and others, more contentious. So when does an interaction cross the line and become disrespectful, inappropriate and vexatious behaviour? From whose point of view? These are questions not easily answered and the tendency to act hastily from any one standpoint should be carefully considered.

I feel that the current RWP is quite broad and open to differing interpretations depending on one's point of view. The policy states that unacceptable conduct includes "*conduct that is known or ought to be reasonably to be known as unwelcome*" Does this refer to name-calling, intimidation or mere criticism?

Was the intent of the alleged inappropriate behaviour to cause "*emotional harm*", to humiliate or demean a person(s) or merely to present a factual or alternative viewpoint?

Remedies and Oversight

There are a wide range of remedies in the RWP for dealing with disrespectful behaviour or misconduct. Perhaps a more systematic or step by step approach would be useful to avoid escalation of an issue. The elements are there, just not in an progressive fashion.

The use of alternative forms of dispute resolution can also be a less combative way of settling complaints between respective parties. Indeed, the RWP defines a Respectful Workplace as inclusive of "*constructive resolution of disputes*". Perhaps this could be set out in greater detail through a revised policy.

The oversight or responsibility for enforcement of the RWP should be an independent and arms length process. Indeed, the current Policy under the Appeal Process, makes reference to seeking possible legal advice or referral of the matter to a "*consultant*". The latter, although not clearly defined, would presumably be outside the internal City structure and more of an arbiter of the situation.

Finally, the closing paragraph of the RWP, the "*Evaluation of Occurrences*" section (pg.6) reads:

On an annual basis, an analysis of occurrences will be completed by the Corporate Leadership Team. The Procedures and Guidelines will be evaluated and revised as needed.

I would urge the City of Stratford to take this opportunity to review its Respectful Workplace Policy of May 8, 2023 per the Motion before Council for the purpose of strengthening the policy and to present the findings in a public report.

Yours sincerely,

Joan Bidell

cc. Ms. Tatiana Dafoe, City Clerk

Ms. Joan Thomson, Chief Administrative Officer

Mr. David Bush, Director, Human Resources