

Edmonton city council could adopt first-in-Canada parental leave plan ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Edmonton's city council is one step closer to approving a first-in-Canada policy that would allow sitting councillors to take up to six months of parental leave after the birth or adoption of a child.

"We want to remove every barrier for women seeking office," said Coun. Bev Esslinger Tuesday. "It's not an option anymore that councils don't address it."

Under current rules, the mayor and council are not permitted to miss more than eight consecutive weeks of council meetings, unless that absence is authorized by the rest of council.

Recently elected officials, such as Coun. Ed Gibbons, have used such approved absences due to health issues.

But the right to parental leave shouldn't be left to the discretion of colleagues, said Esslinger.

"We want our councils to reflect our community. That's people of all ages, of all genders, of all nationalities. This is why I believe enabling a piece of policy will encourage more [of that]."

The proposed policy would allow councillors to take 10 weeks off from work with full pay to be covered by the city. Councillors don't pay into the federal employment insurance program, and are therefore not eligible to collect EI.

The new policy proposes elected officials could also take up to another 16 weeks off from work, or work part-time from home, with the remuneration to be determined based on their work.

Councillors would be responsible for determining who would cover constituent concerns while absent.

Mat leave in provincial spotlight

The issue of parental leave for politicians has been in the spotlight in Alberta since Status of Women Minister Stephanie McLean became the first woman to have a child while holding a seat in the legislature, in 2016.

The NDP has promised legislation to permit MLAs to take parental leave, but it still hasn't been finalized.

Since then, associate health minister Brandy Payne has also given birth as an MLA, and Justice Minister Kathleen Ganley is expecting to give birth later this year.

In a statement, Payne said it's time to see "similar gains at the local and school board levels" when it comes to gender parity in government.

Former city councillor Kim Krushell said that even with such a policy in place, there are still struggles for people with families because the job's demands on time are so great.

"Even when you're missing, you're always on as a politician, wherever you are," Krushell told CBC's Radio Active on Tuesday afternoon.

"Even when I took vacations, I often took calls. Each individual councillor will make their decision based on what makes sense for them at the time. A paternity option for councillors is the right thing to do and I don't think it will be abused."

Policy will take time

The policy discussion comes two months before the next municipal election, and any changes that happen could affect the tenure of future councillors.

Esslinger is currently the only woman on the 13-person council. Groups such as Equal Voice have been pushing for more women to run in this election.

"It was definitely something I thought about," said Samantha Hees, a council candidate for Ward 10, about what it might mean to have a

child while at city hall.

"It is a 24-7, year-round job that really does become your life, and I don't think the previous leave guidelines were appropriate for the modern day, where people do want to take parental leave."

Keren Tang is running for council in Ward 11. She is currently on maternity leave, with her 11-month-old child.

"For me, yes it's nice to have a perk like this," she said about the proposed policy. "But I'm more interested in how we can create a cultural shift so we have a more child-friendly environment within politics to encourage young women to stay and not scare them off."

The draft policy was unanimously endorsed by executive committee on Tuesday, and is being forwarded to city council for approval.

But the province must finalize its review of the Municipal Government Act before Edmonton city council can pass a new bylaw to authorize a parental leave.

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