

Bring your baby to work: Saskatoon councillor deals with lack of parental leave ^[1]

Counc. Mairin Loewen returned to work shortly after giving birth to her baby boy

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EXCERPTS

Like many Canadian elected officials, Saskatoon city councillors are not eligible for parental leave. Now, conversations are taking place across the country to change that.

Saskatoon city councillor Mairin Loewen returned to work shortly after giving birth to her baby boy, Asa, who is now nine-months-old.

"Part of the complicated situation of being an elected official and having a baby, is that you don't actually want to be away from work for very long because you feel a sense of obligation and responsibility to the people who've elected you," Coun. Loewen said.

"There was certainly a large part of me that wanted to be away and spending time with Asa and getting into the rhythms of having a baby, but there were other parts of that felt anxious about being at work, like I was missing out on things I should be participating in."

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While Saskatoon councillors are not eligible for a formal parental leave, they can miss up to three council meetings and could request medical leave, at the discretion of their colleagues. Coun. Zach Jeffries (left) contemplates the idea. (Submitted by Mairin Loewen)

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has said his government will start examining maternity and paternity leave options for federal politicians. Several municipalities are deciding how they might be able to grant formal leave to new parents.

Loewen said her son went with her everywhere at first and would sleep through meetings. Now, Asa's more vocal and spends more time with his grandparents.

"He still makes a pretty frequent appearance at city hall," Loewen said.

After giving birth, Loewen said she phased work back in, attending meetings about three weeks later.

"It was sort of a slow reintroduction. I missed one council meeting the month that he was born and then after that I've been steadily back at it," she said.

Saskatoon Mayor Charlie Clark and city council have been praised by Coun. Mairin Loewen as being very supportive. (Submitted by Mairin Loewen)

Leave granted at discretion of council

While Saskatoon councillors are not eligible for a formal parental leave, they can miss up to three council meetings and could request medical leave at the discretion of their colleagues.

Although she personally didn't need it, Loewen said she supports granting councillors leave in case mothers suffer complications or need bed rest.

Loewen said it also depends on the people you work with. In her own case, she said the other councillors and Mayor Charlie Clark, have been very supportive.

"My colleagues have helped me in terms of picking up slack with events and obligations and even handling some constituency work," she said. "It's been a very positive experience from that perspective and my colleagues have been wonderful."

Coun. Hilary Gough tends to a sleeping Asa. Although Coun. Mairin Loewen personally didn't need it, she supports granting councillors leave in case mothers suffer complications or need bed rest. (Submitted by Mairin Loewen)

Loewen's not the only one to become a mother on council. Tiffany Paulson gave birth to two children while she served as a city councillor in Saskatoon.

Loewen said a formal leave may be necessary for people with a different work situation.

"Maybe not every council would be that supportive and maybe not every mayor would be that supportive. Some protection, some guarantee that you could carve out some time for yourself and your family, would be really useful," she said.

Loewen said she is encouraged by the fact that in some jurisdictions, a leave for elected officials has become a provincial regulation. She said she would be supportive of that in Saskatchewan.

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