

'We have some work to do': Saskatoon city hall studying parental leave for councillors ^[1]

Councillors call current rules outdated, also looking at potential child care issues

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Help may be coming for Saskatoon city councillors who need to take time off after having a child.

In a committee meeting this week, council voted to explore changing the rules around parental and elder-care leave. Currently, provincial legislation states any leave that lasts longer than three months must be approved by a vote from council.

"In my view, being a mother should not be a barrier to serve in political office," said Coun. Cynthia Block. "Clearly, we have some work to do."

Coun. Mairin Loewen voted in favour of further study of the issue. She ended up missing only one council meeting after having a baby last year.

"I think that one thing more specific and deliberate policy around leave would achieve is giving some clarity, both to the member of council and also to their constituents, about the nature of the leave and the parameters of the leave, and who's going to be covering that person's work," she said.

The City of Edmonton recently voted to allow its council members 26 weeks of parental leave. Calgary and Toronto are both investigating the idea.

"We have a council right now where we have [a] majority [of] women," said Block. "If that is not to be an anomaly going forward, I think we need to address some of these barriers."

Right now, rules around excused leave are dictated by the provincial Cities Act. City administration has been asked to talk to the province about changing the act, and a spokesperson from the Ministry of Government Relations said it would consider changing the change if approached.

Child care assistance

Councillors also asked administration to look into whether new parents could access child care when they have to travel on city business with their children.

Loewen said she often has to travel as part of her role, and wanted more information on whether the city would be able to provide assistance.

"I've been in that exact situation," said Block. "My employer at the time, when I arrived at the destination, ensured that there was child care available for me while I was working.... That was 20 years ago."

Councillors also voted in favour of allocating \$88,000 for an additional councillors' assistant and \$21,000 for a contingency to be used as additional support for councillors if it was required.

Loewen believes the additional support would be a big help for any councillor who went on leave.

"Presently we have one assistant who works for all of city council," she said. "If a councillor takes a leave for whatever reason, then that one assistant becomes overly burdened with that one councillor's work."

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