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OPINION

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Editorial

It's deja-vu all over again: Kore tries to pull an Augustyn

If you're a newcomer to our blessed town, you may be surprised to learn that a few years back there was an official attempt to ban this newspaper from Town Hall, an act that drew national attention and condemnation. In 2018, then-Mayor David Augustyn was unhappy that our reporting exposed the Town's land-for-credits scheme in East Fonthill for all to see—coverage that later won the Voice top honours in our newspaper association's province-wide annual investigative reporting competition.

This week Councillor Ron Kore, aided and abetted by Councillor Marianne Stewart, is following in the Augustyn council's Nixonian footsteps.

As of this writing, Kore is set to bring a motion to Pelham Town Council on Tuesday—seconded by Stewart—that he hopes will ban the Town from doing business with this newspaper. We're dubbing it the Trojan Horse Motion.

On the outside it looks innocent enough—even noble. At a recent council meeting Kore spoke of the need to protect elected officials from the unconscionable behaviour seen elsewhere in Niagara, as some officeholders have endured acts of vandalism as a result of their support for Covid protocols. Violence and intimidation clearly have no place in Canadian politics. Such conduct should rightly be condemned.

The guts of Kore's motion are another story. The actual reason that he's pushing it comes at the end:

"...the Town of Pelham will not support or conduct business with individuals, organizations, companies, news media, or tabloid outlets that discriminate, spread misinformation, spread hate through the community, bully individuals, promote acts of violence, harassment and intimidation against elected officials and government employees."

With this paragraph, Councillors Kore and Stewart convincingly demonstrate that they are unfit for public office.

There is no substantive difference between banning the newspaper from Town Hall and calling for an end to doing business with it due to occasional criticism of extremely bad policies or reprehensible conduct.

The Voice publishes commentary about abysmal actions regardless of whose they are. If Mayor Junkin were to support a ban on doing business with the Voice because he was miffed by the paper's perspective, then he too would be called out as fundamentally undemocratic.

Serving in public office requires a thick skin and an understanding that not everyone is going to be happy with every decision you make. As Councillor Kore is again proving, his skin is thin to the point of translucence.

(It is also remarkably hypocritical, given his documented past conduct with Town staff, that Kore should now be concerned about bullying.)

There is a Charter right to free speech that is guaranteed to all, including to this newspaper. The Kore motion attempts to do indirectly what would clearly be illegal if done directly—it's an effort to silence fair-minded journalism that actually follows and discusses the decisions of this council.

As a member of the Ontario Community Newspaper Association, the National NewsMedia Council, and the Canadian Association of Journalists, the paper and our staff are obligated to conduct ourselves ethically in the pursuit of accurate reporting. (As you'll see on page 2 this week, our peers seem to be confident that we manage to do so.)

Then there is the matter of Kore's own ethics. Following our reporting on his conduct at the start of Covid (also award-winning), Kore effectively made it impossible to distribute the Voice at his Fonthill Sobey's grocery store. This is Kore's right as a private citizen and business operator. It inconveniences only his own customers.

As an elected official, however, Kore took an oath to act in the best interest of the municipality. Yet clearly the councillor would like to use his leverage on council to fuel his own war against the press. He is putting his personal interests

ahead of those of the community—virtually the very definition of unethical, and likely grounds for a Code of Conduct complaint.

As for Councillor Stewart, who is less frequently mentioned in these pages because she says and does fewer unwise things than Councillor Kore, one can only wonder whether she fully appreciates the implications of this attempted coercion. Two weeks ago Stewart seemed perfectly happy appearing in a photo and story about new pickleball courts coming to her ward. That was good publicity. Now she apparently sees the need to threaten this same publication so that it will only be nice to her in this, an election year.

Critical editorial comment is a far cry from "promoting" hate or violence. The Voice holds all elected officials to a high standard. We also consistently ask every councillor to contribute their own perspective, in their own words without editing, on important issues of the day.

Just one problem. Like a petulant four-year-old faced with broccoli, Kore refuses to open his mouth.

The councillor has not responded to or even acknowledged a Voice communication of any kind since June 19, 2020. That's 614 days ago.

Councillors Kore and Stewart are now attempting to chart a course where the Town will no longer inform the public through

a periodical that has the temerity to criticize members of council. Heaven forbid. At what point did they confuse their personal interests with the community's interest? And who, exactly, is to be the judge as to what constitutes hate and the promotion of violence? Kore's motion is silent on this critical point, but one assumes that it must be either unelected Town staff or the councillors themselves. How's that for a conflict of interest.

To be clear, the noble elements of Kore's Trojan Horse—the theoretical rationale behind it—are worth supporting. People won't run for office if they worry about zealots vandalizing their property. But Kore's poisonous paragraph serving only his blatant self-interest must go.

Arthur Sulzberger, publisher of the New York Times for nearly 30 years, famously said, "Freedom of the press, or, to be more precise, the benefit of freedom of the press, belongs to everyone—to the citizen as well as the publisher. The crux is not the publisher's 'freedom to print.' It is, rather, the citizen's 'right to know.'"

All residents of Pelham benefit from a free press, even if some occasionally disagree with its editorial positions. If Councillors Kore and Stewart can't see that, then they should simply resign their seats. The town will be just fine without them. ♦

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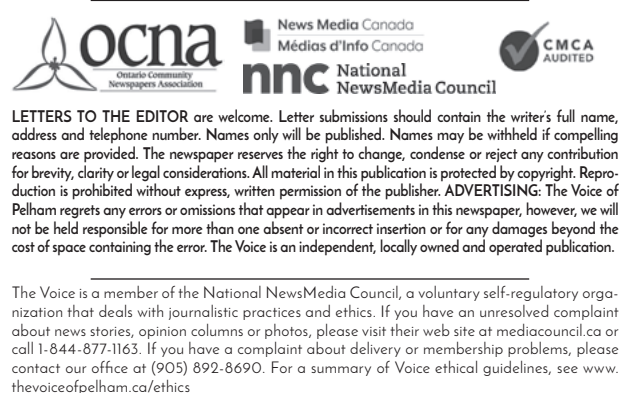
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