



Opportunity for municipalities to focus on expression: Equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) will move from being a project to practice when it is incorporated into policy development, program planning, and community engagement. *Above: Canada 150 celebration at East Gwillimbury*

Equity, diversity, and inclusion in a small municipality

The power of narrative in East Gwillimbury



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“It’s because people like *you* keep coming here.” Those are the piercing words uttered at me by a resident at a secondary plan information session. I was a municipal employee at the time, and the target of this man’s frustration (and clearly his racism), at the municipality’s plan to intensify development. He wasn’t happy – and he wasn’t afraid to tell me that in front of other residents and my peers. This wasn’t many years ago. It was 2019.

As a woman of colour, I know first-hand what it feels like to be treated differently because of the colour of my skin. As a mother of a child with autism, I know the challenges he faces and the countless meetings I have had with educators about the accommodations he needs. As a mother of a child in the LGBTQ2S+ community, I know the challenges she faces with inclusion and acceptance. As a daughter of a senior citizen who’s English is not her first language, I see the inequities she faces in getting care.

When I watched the mass protests last summer, after the brutal murder of George Floyd and too many others like him, I found myself thinking even more about how diversity and inclusion impacts my life and the lives of those around me. I reflected on my own experiences when I was treated differently, in and outside of work.

I thought of the experience at the secondary plan session. I thought about the time my car was surrounded by three police cars when I was out for the evening with friends. I was the only person of colour in our group and the person driving the car. What stands out is that one of the officers shouted out “You

know it’s 9/11 (September 11)” as all three police cars left – after finding nothing to charge me with.

My personal experience with racism extends to childhood bullying, housing discrimination, and countless times when I heard derogatory words hurled at me, or my family, for as long as I can remember. In all these instances there was one common thread – I didn’t do anything. I was scared, worried that taking action would trigger a violent response.

Municipal Role in Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion

Elevating the discussion about equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) is about speaking up. Bringing a voice to those to whom it has been denied for too long.

When the Town of East Gwillimbury offered me a position that included diversity and inclusion, I knew that accepting the offer was the right decision. But I wasn’t quite sure where to start. And as I write this, seven weeks into the job, I’m still trying to figure it out.

As organizations started to rally around anti-Black racism – to reach out to staff, customers, and clients and declare their commitment to EDI initiatives – I wondered about the role municipalities have.

In a previous role, I advocated for messages to express support for staff. Some staff reached out to me directly – expressing that they hoped for a message to staff or some type of public statement denouncing racism and expressing a commitment to community building that values EDI. Some of the larger communities did that. Others initiated EDI

committees to seek public input on how the municipality should proceed. Many struggled with how to proceed.

In my experience, EDI hasn't been at the forefront of municipal strategic plans or employee engagement. Thankfully, this is starting to change.

Shaping the East Gwillimbury EDI Vision

The Town of East Gwillimbury is a York Region municipality with a population of approximately 36,000. It's one of the "smaller" municipalities in a region that's also home to Vaughan, Markham, and Richmond Hill.

Small and medium-sized municipalities are typically agile and can make changes quickly. According to East Gwillimbury CAO Tom Webster, "We have an ability to influence and lead positive change from day one."

The community, like many, is growing and the newcomers are diverse in colour, in needs, in education and background, in ability, and in age. How do we as a municipality celebrate the diversity, encourage community engagement from all residents, and develop policies and programs that reflect the diversity and celebrate the differences?

Inclusion charter

In 2019, the town adopted the York Region Inclusion Charter, highlighting its commitment to welcoming and embracing inclusive communities. The town is also a member of the Municipal Diversity and Inclusion group, which includes York Region municipalities, police services, hospitals, school boards, conservation authorities, and agencies with a common commitment to welcoming and inclusive communities.

Advisory committee

Also in 2019, town council initiated a Diversity and Inclusion Advisory Committee of Council with a mandate to promote community engagement, create an inclusive community, and celebrate the unique characteristics of residents. Its objectives include working with staff to:

- implement the Inclusion Charter;
- provide advice, comments, and recommendations on issues affecting diversity in the community; and
- foster awareness, reduce barriers, promote inclusion, and engage residents.

Collaborative projects and milestones

The municipality is also part of the Engaged, Inclusive Communities Project. The project is a collaborative approach among Aurora, East Gwillimbury, and Newmarket municipalities, with Neighbourhood Network (a community-based organization funded by Magna International) as the lead community partner. The project takes an integrated approach to examining shared challenges and opportunities, and researching specific needs of the communities involved.

Other significant milestones included the construction of a community flagpole, which is used to raise flags to symbolize various causes or groups and to raise awareness within the community.

Land acknowledgement

Council is planning to offer a land acknowledgement statement that was developed with direct input from the Chippewas of Georgina Island First Nation, the municipality's closest First Nations Indigenous community. And, in pre-COVID times, the town hosted a Tapestry of Taste event to increase community engagement and celebrate the diversity the community brings.

Three Small Steps to Make a Difference

Within the town, staff training and development opportunities continue with several training sessions focusing on EDI. Moving forward, there is an opportunity to create a framework with a focus on engagement, education, and expression – both internally and externally.

The programs and committees that are already in place are all amazing steps to increase awareness and diversity within our communities. As a municipality, it's also important to ensure that these steps have a real impact on employees and community members alike. It's important to ensure that no one has to experience what I did as a municipal employee. And, if they do, to know that they have a safe community and a secure process to report these incidents.

By making small steps in our individual communities, we can work to make a true difference.

1. Engage

East Gwillimbury is well poised to further community engagement through

the Diversity and Inclusion Advisory Committee of Council, and through ongoing community engagement. Reaching people where they live is a key component of this, which means that there is an opportunity to develop stronger ties with community groups and better understand their needs.

Internally, employee engagement through an EDI committee will enable the organization to better understand the needs of employees, as well as identify training opportunities and better ways to connect with staff.

With online meetings becoming mandatory due to COVID, we are now able to see everyone's image, including our own, at the same time. As a woman of colour, I am often amazed at how few people "look" like me in meetings. I'm usually one of the few visible minorities at executive level meetings. There's an opportunity to change that. That opportunity exists in municipal councils, too. Engagement is not only about seeking different points of view, it's also about making sure that municipal employees and councils reflect the communities they support.

2. Educate

While various resources and training opportunities are available to staff, there is an opportunity to create learning pathways for all staff. It starts with understanding EDI language and terms such as equity, diversity, inclusion, unconscious bias, and others.

Education is also about increasing awareness and understanding.

"We need to make sure that there is nobody left behind," said East Gwillimbury Mayor Virginia Hackson. "We need to make sure that the people who have been here forever have the opportunity to meet people with different backgrounds. We also need to consider that diversity is also about differently abled bodied people, seniors, and mental health."

3. Express

To truly embrace EDI, there is an opportunity for all municipalities to focus on expression. While flag raisings and land acknowledgements are a good start, EDI will move from being a project to practice when it is incorporated into policy development, program planning, and community engagement.

How do we do this as a smaller municipality? It starts with engagement and education. It starts with asking the questions of how a policy may impact seniors, people with autism, visible minorities, Indigenous communities, LGBTQ2S+ people, and others. It starts with broadening flag raising ceremonies to educational events where people can learn about the

cause or community for which a flag is being raised. It starts with working with adjacent municipalities to bolster resources, learning from each other, and developing common tools and approaches.

Framework for Community Connection

I'm a strong believer in the power of developing a narrative that connects

people. Engage, Educate, and Express is a framework that helps build that narrative. It allows us to leverage the immense amount of work that the municipality has already initiated and focus our efforts on moving equity, diversity, and inclusion from project to practice.

We will all be better for it. [MW](#)

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