

Town's proposed firearms bylaw shot to pieces by gun owners

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A proposed updated version of the bylaw governing the discharging and use of firearms in Halton Hills met stiff resistance when brought before the community affairs committee last week.

With the original discharge of firearms bylaw enacted in 1994, the town's bylaw enforcement office sought to update and modernize it.

Chief among town staff's concerns were changes in Halton Hills urban boundaries and the outdated boundary maps indicating where it was and wasn't safe to discharge a firearm.

"(The) intent was to increase public safety as well as clarify and improve regulated and prohibited boundaries," said supervisor of enforcement Marina Booten in a presentation to the committee at the Nov. 20 meeting.

The proposed bylaw drew five resident delegations with objec-

tions to some of the changes. Delegations included individual residents, the Georgetown Revolver Club and David Eagleson, a firearms safety and education expert who lives in town. The Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters also submitted a letter of objection.

The main sticking points surrounded the definition of a firearm, a change to the distance from a structure where one can be fired, as well as how the changes would affect farmers and hunters.

"The proposed definition of a firearm is so poorly (broadly) worded, it has the risk of prohibiting the use of a child's toy, or a pneumatic carpenter's tool, or even a starter's pistol at athletic events without a permit," Eagleson told the committee.

The updated definition of a firearm in the bylaw is definitely more broad compared to 1994, expanding from "any type of gun or firearm" to "Any type of device

from which a projectile can be discharged". The new proposed definition also included specific examples, whereas the existing definition referred to federal and provincial classifications. Both definitions include "or anything that can be adapted for use as a firearm."

"The bylaw fails to recognize current federal and safety education," added Eagleson.

Another issue raised was the safe distance from any structure from which it is safe to discharge a firearm based on the updated definition.

The new bylaw sets a standard of 150 metres from any structure of any kind and 300 metres from any school. At least three of the delegates pointed out the seeming arbitrariness of the chosen numbers. Each pointed out such a regulation would make it almost impossible to shoot a projectile of any kind almost anywhere in Halton Hills - even in rural areas.

It was also pointed out the proposed range is far too large to reasonably apply to a bows and air guns, whose projectiles don't travel nearly that far. The distance is also insignificant when talking about a projectile from even the smallest of calibre guns and rifles.

In addition, the bylaw restricts the use of firearms near public trails or roadways, but does not prohibit firing in the direction of trails and roadways - logic that had delegates scratching their heads.

Police officers, pest control workers, indoor shooting ranges and the firing of blanks are specifically exempt in the updated version.

Other concerns were raised relating to farmers and a lack of clarity about how the new definitions and regulations would affect them.

The new bylaw also demands hunters get written consent from property owners to hunt on pri-

vate property, as opposed to the current standard only requiring verbal consent. Those objecting felt this was an unnecessary and needlessly goes above provincial and federal standards already in place.

Councillors Ted Brown and Bob Inglis were skeptical out of the gate, fearing the new bylaw wasn't clear enough to pass.

In the end, the committee split the bylaw, passing all the less controversial elements including the new boundary maps, which staff was most concerned about in terms of safety and enforcement. A bump in the fine for those who violate the rules to \$400 was also approved.

The definitions and new restrictions, however, will be revisited, meaning most of the existing standards will remain in place for the foreseeable future. The portions of the bylaw which were approved by the committee will be brought before council at its next meeting for final approval.



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