

February 27, 2024

Notice of Motion for Community Safety Meeting agenda March 12 put forward by Laura Gillanders

Motion:

That staff research and review our current policies and bylaws relating to body rub studios by consulting with agencies such as SWAN, PACE Society, Living in Community, Pivot Legal Society, and VCASE, as well as compare ours to bylaws in other municipalities; that staff report back to Community Safety Committee with findings and/or options to ensure our policies are aligned with current best practices.

Background:

On February 26, Richmond City Council voted for an option for enforcement of escort services and body rub studios and subsequent amendments to the related bylaws which would allow for increased inspections and escalated fines for business license holders not in compliance with our bylaws.

We have received a great deal of correspondence from the agencies listed in the referral motion – SWAN, PACE Society, Living in Community, as well as other experts, authors of peer-reviewed publications on the subject as well as some groups offering another viewpoint such as VCASE. Many of these groups have offered to meet and consult with our Richmond staff on the subject. PIVOT Legal Society is another resource.

One of the things we repeatedly heard from delegations was that increased enforcement was causing harm to women as some women have chosen to leave the safe place of work in Richmond and go underground. Of particular interest is the suggestion that other municipalities have slightly less stringent bylaws around employee registration that offer more discretion. We heard that all of the women known to those who have studied the subject who work in body rub studios are women who have chosen this work without coercion and that they may be professionals in the community but are unable to make financial ends meet and chose to supplement their income. We heard that having to come in to City Hall and register as an employee of a body rub studio is not discreet enough for some of these women. Perhaps there is a better way to present registration.

We also heard that there have been no cases of human trafficking in approximately 20 years. If human trafficking is extremely rare in these establishments, then we should be at least equally concerned with the very real possibility that our bylaws could be making it less safe for women. We have heard this is a real concern and many councillors expressed they would like to learn more.

By researching and reviewing the bylaws and consulting with experts from all sides of the subject, we should be able to strike a balance that ensures protection and safety of employees, compliance with bylaws, a relationship of trust between employees of these establishments and the city and RCMP, and prevention of human trafficking and organized crime. The findings may show there are no adjustments needed to our bylaws but we will have been thorough in investigating the claims of the delegations.