



Council News & Notes

From Tuesday, February 27, 2024

Upcoming Meetings

Council Meeting
March 12

9 am

Regular
Council Meeting

Council Meeting
March 26, 2024

5 pm

Regular Council
Meeting

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Mayors' Message

On February 13th I attended Daryl Kramp's wake.

On February 14th I participated in Hastings County's Community & Human Services Committee Meeting. That afternoon Rachelle Hardesty and I had a meeting with Jake Brockman from Uber. I then headed to the Belleville General Hospital for the launch of the hospital's redesign of the Nuclear Medicine wing which will accommodate two new nuclear cameras.

On the 15th I had a follow-up meeting with Mayo Hawco, Executive Director of our Gateway Community Health Centre. That evening I attended a Kiwanis Meeting.

On the 16th I attended a meeting to address the reforestation component of the 2022 tornado funding we received from the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry. That afternoon we held a special Council Meeting. At the end of the day we had a conference call with Ms. Aryn Azzopardi, Chief of Staff for Minister Surma, Ministry of Infrastructure. More on that call later in my remarks.

And then the fun started. Thank you to the Fair Board and all of the volunteers who pulled off yet another amazing Tweed Winter Carnival. It was a jam packed weekend with so many fun activities. It has been a dark and gloomy winter and we are grateful to you for having brightened our days. I saw Council out and about joining in the festivities.

On the 20th I chaired the County Planning and Development Committee Meeting. I then attended their Finance, Property & Personnel Committee Meeting.

On the 21st we hosted our Prefab Bridge Forum which was organized by Councillors Flieler and Valiquette with assistance from Lucas Wales our Deputy Clerk. This was a promise we made during the September Potential Bridge Closure Open House. With our finances extremely tight it becomes even more critical that we find alternative cost effective ways to repair and fix our bridges. Reserves are at an all-time low, we are fast approaching our debt ceiling and neither the federal nor provincial governments are announcing any funding programs to help with small rural infrastructure projects. Added to our financial dilemma is that we are required to set aside \$11.5

million per year for the next 15-20 years to cover future infrastructure costs. This is an insurmountable, non-achievable financial infrastructure obligation.

Although 14 bridge builders were contacted, only two attended. We had a wonderful session with both Northern Mat & Bridge and Armtech. There will be opportunities to work with both of these bridge builders. The mornings presentations were followed by a bridge tour that afternoon.

On the 22nd I attended a Belleville General Hospital Foundation Meeting. On the 26th we met with Mike Labbe, Founder & CEO of Home Opportunities. Home Opportunities strives to develop housing that is accessible to everyone and strengthens communities. They are driven by the principal that everyone deserves an equal opportunity to own a home. We look forward to introducing Mike Labbe to the rest of Council, local developers and community stakeholders.

Hastings County has just released the 2024 edition of their Community Services booklet which touches upon: meals & clothing, transportation & recreation, housing & childcare, and employment & training. This booklet is available at the Municipal Office.

I would like to share with you information on our third ROMA delegation which was with Parliamentary Assistant Smith, Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport. The purpose of this delegation was to solicit an increase in library funding from the province which has not changed since 1998. Our meeting with PA Smith went exactly the way you would hope that a representative of the sitting government would treat you. Her genuine concern, interest and provoking questions related to our request left us feeling that we were heard and that there is hope on the horizon.

PA Smith enthusiastically embraced the importance of libraries. She talked about how they helped shaped the fine young men her sons are today and also helped them with their career choices. She was amazed at what our small rural library does, the services it provides, who it serves and how the facility is used. Our MPP Ric Bresee also noted how important our library is to the seniors in our community and what a hub it is for the municipality. It was an excellent meeting.

I mentioned earlier that Ms. Azzopardi, Minister Surma's Chief of Staff, sent me an email requesting that I give her a call re the "attached video". The video was in reference to my February 13th Mayor's remarks that someone sent to Minister Surma. Ms. Azzopardi noted that Minister Surma did not say she supported our 17.8% tax increase during our delegation. I noted it was a matter of semantics because Minister Surma did note that she supported our efforts to address our financial dilemma, which was based on our tax increase. I would like to note that Ms. Azzopardi was very courteous and wonderful to deal with. We appreciated her reaching out and I noted that I would make it clear that Minister Surma did not say "I support your 17.8% tax increase." Ms. Azzopardi requested a copy of our letter to Minister Surma and she would see what she could do to help us. It was actually a very pleasant exchange. We look forward to hearing from Minister Surma.

We received an email from Parliamentary Assistant Byers confirming that that provincial government will not entertain a vacancy tax on rural commercial buildings. Then we receive this notice from Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs:

"Ontario's rural areas offer beautiful landscapes, a sense of community, vibrant towns and villages, and a high quality of life for residents. Often referred to as the heart of the province, (hate to break it to the province but small rural municipal hearts are in a state of cardiac arrest and on life support), they have a direct influence on the success and prosperity of Ontario as a whole. While opportunities in these communities are increasing, they also have unique challenges and perspectives (yes that we do..such as unfathomable infrastructure costs, debt to province at ridiculous interest rates, homelessness, housing, etc.)."

Each community is different and the Ontario government recognizes that policy and approaches must be flexible enough to promote economic growth in all communities – from our smallest to our largest. *(Hence our request to implement a commercial vacancy tax on properties vacant for 6 months or more when there is a renter in the wings)*

We are committed to looking at these unique challenges and ensuring that rural communities can thrive and prosper long into the future. That's why we are looking for public input to inform the creation of a Rural Economic Development Strategy to help improve economic opportunities, create jobs and support economic growth."

Yet another fundamental disconnect between this provincial government, its various ministries and the needs of small rural Ontario.

One of the items in today's Council package is an article from the Bancroft Times that shares the concerns of Mayors across Hastings County highlighting how the provincial government has turned its back on small rural Ontario. And that frustration and anger was further stoked by Premier Ford's Thursday announcement about a further \$114 million to Toronto in support of housing. And on Friday Premier Ford announces \$25.5 million for Brampton. Well this cash cow just keeps on giving to anyone that doesn't consider themselves "small rural Ontario". When the Premier says: "All the folks out there, the mayors, the wardens, take a page out of Toronto's book", I say "okay...give me that page, that chapter, that says how to get billions from Premier Ford"!

Every issue facing urban centers we also face. The big difference is that we do not have the financial capacity nor the federal or provincial funding streams to address them.

Brian Rosborough, AMO Director and Colin Best, AMO President recently reported:

"Ontario's total per capita spending is the lowest in the country at about \$2,000 per person below the average of the other provinces and territories. Meanwhile, its revenue sources are enviable. Provincial income tax and HST revenues grow with economic activity, higher incomes, inflation, and housing starts. Municipal tax revenue does not."

I know I keep harping on this but my frustration and anger is shared by every member sitting at this table and many Mayors and Councillors across this great province.

In closing, I am in constant touch with our MPP Ric Bresee and he really does understand. He served on Loyalist Township Municipal Council for 22 years. He identifies with the issues we are all facing. I know he is trying really hard to get us the help we need.

Premier Ford needs to realize that small rural Ontario is not going to back down. In fact we are getting angrier and now feel the need to mobilize. There is a movement afoot to take this fight to him since he is not prepared to step up to the plate and help us. And then we go knocking on Prime Minister Trudeau's door. There is much to share on the federal Housing Accelerator Fund.