

## Mayor's Blog – January 21, 2019

I hope everyone had a great holiday and got to relax and spend some time with family and friends.

At the December 18th meeting Council “opted in” to allow retail cannabis stores in Zorra. When Council considered this issue it had the same concerns that some residents expressed. However, Zorra Council was not deciding whether cannabis would be legal or not, that decision has been made by the Federal Government, but was deciding only whether or not retail stores would be allowed in Zorra (other than post offices which are already operating). Council felt that it was an inevitable outcome of federal and provincial policy that it is going to be a reality of business and by-law enforcement in the Township. Based on an excellent report from Staff, on the powers granted to municipalities by the Province to regulate cannabis retail, Council felt that it was better to proceed with regulating it. There are exclusion zones around our three Zorra elementary schools where those businesses can't operate, and of course as retail stores they'd have to comply with all the normal zoning as well. All that being said, the Province has chosen to proceed with a lottery system to determine which municipalities will get retail outlets, and only those with populations of 50,000 or greater were considered, and only 25 of those were selected. Therefore, in the short term, there will be no cannabis retail store fronts in Zorra. But when it does come, we will be as ready as we can be because we will already have policies in place. I am confident that Council made an informed and responsible decision.

I received a letter from Ontario Minister of Finance Vic Fideli on Friday December 21st at 4:47pm...

Every year Ontario municipalities receive funds from the Province to compensate us for actions undertaken in the “Provincial Interest” called the Ontario Municipal Partnership Fund. This has been reduced by over a million dollars for Zorra over the last five years and has been one of the biggest drivers of residential property tax increases. The Province is warning us of coming cuts to funding which will mean some level of transfer of taxation from the Provincial budget to the Municipal budget, and that we will not be notified in time to prepare or budget accordingly. Basically, it will mean pressure on Zorra to either reduce services or increase property taxes.

At the January 9th Oxford County Council meeting we began debate and Motions to modify the 2019 Draft Budget. The budget was passed as draft but it will not be passed finally until January 23rd.

High speed internet is now an essential part of economic growth and diversity. It is now a basic infrastructure need. But it's not cheap. If we are to get this in Zorra, in Oxford, it will cost us money, as private operators will never pay to service low population density areas.

At the same County meeting I seconded South West Oxford Mayor David Mayberry's Motion that the County make money available from General Reserves in an amount equivalent to 2% of the tax levy to rural lower tiers (like Zorra) if we match it in our budget. This money would be used in addition to the South West Integrated Fibre Technology (SWIFT) money when it comes to Oxford in 2020/21. The idea is to leverage that opportunity to get a larger job done, at a better price, and faster. It still won't cover everyone, we are just such a large area, and so badly under serviced, but it would be a

strong start. For this to happen it will have to be included in both the Oxford and Zorra Budgets by the respective Councils.

Also at that meeting I was appointed to Oxford County's Agricultural and Planning Advisory Committee (my top choice). "The Agricultural and Planning Advisory Committee (APAC) will primarily function as an advisory body to the County on agricultural and other land use related matters."

Last month I reported that the report "to designate a school zone with a reduced rate of speed (60km/hr), during specified times, on Oxford Rd 6 at Zorra Highland School" would be presented to County Council on January 9th for approval. I am happy to report that it passed unanimously.

On December 21st I met with Minister of Transportation Jeff Yurek to talk about High Speed Rail. I am pleased with the direction the Ministry is going in now, adding alternatives to be considered to the Environmental Assessment, but there is still work to be done to ensure they are appropriate alternatives and that Zorra's concerns are addressed. Zorra has requested a Delegation with the Minister at the upcoming Rural Ontario Municipal Association Conference at the end of January.

Zorra has also requested Delegations to the Minister of Education to continue discussions about rural school funding and education governance in Ontario, the Minister of Natural Resources and Forestry to discuss improved regulation of and compensation for aggregate pits, and the Minister of the Environment, Conservation and Parks to discuss the Walker landfill proposed in Zorra.

Finally, on January 15, I received a letter from the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing Steve Clark. He indicated that the Provincial "government is undertaking a review of regional government in Ontario" and the will include Oxford County and all the lower tiers including Zorra. Two special advisors will conduct the review by interviewing Heads of Council, Councillors, and Staff. This has been known to be coming for some time, and one of the main fears is some level of forced amalgamation. While I welcome any effort to make government more effective and efficient, and plan to fully cooperate with the advisers conducting the review, I do to feel that any changes should not be forced on municipalities. It should be up to us, our community, if we want the changes suggested by the review. This will be an intense and complicated review, but one thing I am sure of is that Zorra will come out well in any review of "what's working well" and "ensuring government works efficiently and effectively for the people."

"We strive to make Zorra better by doing our part. In Zorra, we take great pride in maintaining our exceptional rural lifestyle, made possible by our highly engaged community and government." I will make sure that the advisers understand and appreciate Zorra as I do.

Marcus Ryan  
Mayor, Zorra Township