

Mayor's Blog – February 20, 2019

I have been following the Province's Regional Government Review and all the politics around it, and within it, very closely. I have posted on social media, written an article for Municipal World Magazine, and released an official press release stating the Township's position. If you have read those you will probably recognize much of this blog.

I've read (and re-read) the email from the Minister announcing the review. I have studied the webpage for the review. I have discussed the review with every administrator and politician I can to gain as much knowledge as possible. I have not been able to determine the process we are in. When I had my interview with the advisors, not even they were able to clearly state what the next steps would be. Will the ministry be considering the input and then asking municipalities how to achieve certain goals? Will it be a collaborative process to find areas of improvement? Or will the provincial government simply tell us what's best for us? I don't know. What I do know is what Zorra's council thinks.

In response to the Minister of Municipal Affairs Regional Government Review Zorra Council passed the following resolution:

"Whereas the Township of Zorra is in receipt of the letter from the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing dated January 15, 2019 regarding a review of regional government, And whereas Township of Zorra is one of eight area Municipalities in the County of Oxford, And whereas it is understood that Municipal Governments are "creatures of the Province", And that the Province of Ontario is within it's right to conduct such a review, and identify improvements to make better use of taxpayer dollars while ensuring government works efficiently and effectively for the people, And whereas, the Township of Zorra is well aware of the changing pressures on Municipal Government, and continually stretching our tax dollars and building on what's working well, Therefore be it resolved that the Township of Zorra welcomes such a review and looks forward to participating in it, And, that the Township of Zorra believes that the most effective implementation of such changes would be if they were identified by prescribed outcomes and implemented by the Municipalities themselves with approval of the Province similar to an Official Plan process, And that this resolution be forwarded to all Oxford Municipalities, and the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing."

The resolution was then supported by Oxford County Council on February 13th.

In Zorra our small size and closeness to our residents and their issues and opportunities allows us to be highly responsive and flexible. In rural communities many of our recreational and cultural experiences are provided by dedicated community volunteers using municipal halls. The nature of this transaction is relational: it is a personal relationship between council, staff, and volunteers that fosters the spirit of cooperation essential to volunteerism. This type of relationship is much more difficult to achieve in larger municipalities and would be irreparably damaged by the elimination of a lower-tier. In the short term, the agreements would simply be transferred from one level/branch of

government to another, but the close relationship that fostered the agreement could never be transferred to a more distant government and the activity would eventually wither.

The last thing we need is big government from Toronto coming to rural Ontario and telling us our small government is no good. We do not need a “one size fits all” or “cookie cutter” approach. The politicians best suited, indeed most qualified, to decide what solutions are best for us are those elected by our communities expressly to represent their interests in these municipal matters.

Simply put – we should decide.

When I met with the government appointed special advisors, Ken Seiling and Michael Fenn on February 6, I made clear Zorra’s position and the reasons for that position, along with the opportunities I see for Zorra and Oxford in the future.

- Zorra welcomes this review as an opportunity to find efficiencies and opportunities for improvement in service delivery
- We favour the current two-tier structure
- Amalgamation into a single-tier is not acceptable
- The most effective implementation of any potential changes identified in the review would be if they were implemented by the municipalities themselves

We strive to make Zorra better by doing our part. Zorra is progressive, environmentally conscious, economically strong, and prosperous. The current government structure has contributed directly to this and we look forward to continuing on our positive path within the current government structure.

If the Province has recommended or desired outcomes from the review, they would be most effectively implemented by municipalities and more specifically, a “made in Oxford” solution would be appropriate for Oxford County.

Again, we should decide.

The special advisors aim to have their recommendations to the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing by early summer. They will not be consulting publicly but I am told there will be an online submission opportunity. I will continue to discuss the review with my regional colleagues and welcome suggestions and feedback from Councillors, staff, businesses, and our residents.

We are a small, rural municipality. Our brand is “doing our part” and we take it seriously. We are small, but we are used to being heard. We have successfully lobbied the Ministry of Education to change the rules around school closures and to achieve the current province-wide moratorium on school closures. We have successfully lobbied the Ministry of Transportation to have alternatives added to the environmental assessment of the high-speed rail proposal. We expect to be heard on this issue as well.

Marcus Ryan
Mayor, Zorra Township