

Mayor's Blog – April 18, 2019

Council is now starting work on the 2019-2022 action items for our Strategic Plan. The Strategic Plan is the guiding policy document for Council and Staff for this term of Council. It sets priorities and a work plan that will guide service levels and infrastructure improvements, and inform future budgets (and therefore property tax rates). I encourage you to check the Township website to review the 2016-19 Strategic Plan, and watch the Agendas for opportunities to follow along as Council develops the Strategic Plan. And as always, I encourage you to talk to your Councillor or myself about it.

The Province's Regional Government Review is ongoing and I wish I could tell you more about it, but I have been given no more information. Both Zorra and Oxford Councils have been working hard to formulate a response and try to have a conversation with the Minister of Municipal Affairs about the review. Zorra has taken a position that we are interested in participating in the review to find better ways to deliver services, but are in favour of the current two tier structure. I am hopeful that Oxford County will take a similar position. A Made In Oxford solution will be best for Oxford. On March 20th in Zorra when talking about the proposed landfill the Premier said "Who are a bunch of politicians in Queens Park to tell municipalities how to run their municipality, it is up to them, they have an option, to opt in, or opt out, that is up to them, it is not necessarily up to us to overrule a municipality that is the last thing I would want to do." This is a welcome statement, both in the context of the landfill proposal, and the Regional Government Review. Oxford County Council has decided to proceed with a methodical review of the entire governance structure including representation from all area municipalities. Zorra (and one by one all the other area municipalities) has decided to conduct a service delivery review to look for more efficient ways to deliver, or share delivery of, services. These two efforts combined will form the backbone of our evidence-based recommendations to the Province.

On March 21st Council spent an excellent evening thanking Zorra Employees for #doingtheirpart for us all. Twice a month Council meets and debates and makes decisions, but it is our Employees who turn those ideas and decisions into services our residents use every day. Many thanks to all who organized it, and all who came.

At the end of several County Council meetings the 2019 tax ratios were set. I was not successful in getting the tax ratios that I was arguing for. The ratio is "up to 25%" of residential and it is the intent of that flexibility that we could lower it to compensate for dramatic increases in assessment. Last year County Council reduced it to 23.5%. This year OCFA made an excellent delegation: it referenced the report from County Staff (23.5%), it included OFA analysis and comparisons, and it was a reasonable ask (20.88%). I, with South West Oxford & East Zorra Tavistock Mayors David Mayberry & Don McKay, tried to reach a compromise rate of 22% that could be passed, but Council would not support it. I apologize to those farm property owners left paying an unfair tax increase because of an unfair tax ratio. We tried. I can't imagine a Council voting for such an increase on any other land class. We need to continue to work on this.

The Township is still working on potential plans for the former Maple Leaf property in Thamesford. Council has not yet decided to proceed with the project, only to explore opportunities that would achieve the development that Zorra/Thamesford need without undue risk and without any net debt. So the Township would be looking to purchase the land and then re-sell it to a developer(s) who would be quoting to a Request for Proposal (RFP) issued by the Township. The developer who best satisfies that RFP would be

awarded the deal (assuming they met ALL criteria). There was a well attended public meeting on February 20th to share the current situation with residents and hear their concerns and hopes for the project. Staff continues to work hard on this and I am cautiously optimistic that we may be able to proceed with something this year. Again, only if there is no net debt and no undue risk.

The Provincial Government hosted an "Aggregate Summit" on March 29th. As a municipality with aggregate issues, and in 2017 the fifth largest aggregate producing municipality in Ontario, we were informed about it, and asked to attend, but were not allowed. There were only two municipal representatives and both had to insist on attending and pull strings to get in. This is not right: our residents have legitimate issues with aggregate extraction, municipally it is a large cost to our roads, yet aggregate needs to be extracted. Leaving municipalities out of possible solutions and compromises is not the best way forward for anyone.

At the April 10th County Council meeting there was a delegation from Gavin Houston of Southern Ontario Fisheries Enhancement - "a proposal to improve the rehabilitation of retired gravel pits. A collection of five aggregate industry properties, which border the Thames River, could be developed into Canada's first completely accessible nature park. It would span about 125 hectares (300 acres), rehabilitate a number of Zorra's gravel and aggregate pits, and include more than 10 kilometres of trails through wetlands and places to canoe and kayak – all designed to be accessible for people with mobility challenges. The park would be located within Zorra, bordering on Thames Centre and Middlesex County." This project (which is proposed on privately owned land) has now been supported in principle by both Zorra and Oxford Councils.

Also at the April 10th County Council meeting we received an excellent report from County public Works on Speed Management, Traffic Calming and Road Safety Reviews. It was a specific response to some local traffic issues with a recommended County wide approach to address speeding and traffic calming. I reviewed this policy with County Public Works before it was received at County Council and I'm very happy with it. It will put in place measurement of speeding, make available traffic calming measures, and a continual review to see what's working and what's not. There are tools here to address many issues in our villages.

On April 11th the Provincial Budget was announced and as part of that the Ministry of transportation "paused" the spending on High Speed Rail, and announced there would be a transportation plan for South Western Ontario announced in the fall. This is another victory for Zorra: it was going to take thousands of acres out of agriculture production, it was going to cut our community in half, and it was going to cut agricultural businesses in half." The next step is genuinely improved transit for our region.

On April 17th Zorra Council passed the 2019 Budget. The budget requires a Township levy of \$8,257,785.50, a \$505,029.50 increase or 6.52%. This will not translate directly into a 6.52% property tax increase. The final impact on tax rates will be calculated when the tax ratios are applied and the Province of Ontario establishes the 2019 Education tax rates. This should be complete in early May.

The Township wide "Day of Caring" is on April 25th. Thamesford Public School students presented the idea to Council that students would be out doing things for their community to make other's lives easier. An act of caring can be anything, it could be something as

easy as reading to younger kids, visiting elders, or raking lawns. The students asked if they could use the Township brand #doingourpart, and if the Township would help promote the day, and Council enthusiastically supported this. I also encouraged the students to challenge the other Zorra schools (A.J. Baker P.S. and Zorra Highland Park P.S.) and other community groups, and both schools have enthusiastically taken up the challenge. The Thamesford Lions have now joined in as well, as well as many individual residents. Myself and Councillor Davies will be helping with the snack program at Thamesford P.S. that day and then I will be heading off to help the other schools with their efforts for the day. Watch the Township website and social media for updates on this event. How will you #doyourpart on April 25th?

At the April 17th Council meeting I presented Ruth Calder with the Zorra Senior of the Year Award and Janice Ferguson with the Volunteer of the Year Award. Ruth is out nearly every day making people happy through her gift of music, and Janice has served as the Secretary of the Beachville District Historical Society, and is the Chairperson of the newly formed Outreach Committee at BDM. As I was reading through their many endeavours I frankly couldn't understand how they had the time to spare to receive their awards! But I'm glad they did, and I'm glad they are Doing Their Part for Zorra.

2019 Calithumpian, the 100TH(!!!) Cali, is coming up! A lot of work has gone into this year's event and I'm really looking forward to it. I hope to see you there!

We continue to strive to make Zorra better by doing our part. Zorra is a progressive, environmentally conscious, economically strong, and prosperous. Check in on the website, follow the Township on Facebook or Twitter, phone or email Staff or Council: we want to hear from you.

Join us, and add to your community by doing your part!

As always you can contact me on any issues at:

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