

Mayor's Blog – July 13, 2019

I hope everyone had a great Canada Day, I know I did! I spent the day at the Embro Highland Games and I am so glad the games are back in Embro for good! There was excellent attendance at this event on a glorious summer day. As an extra event this year Township Council offered to take on anyone in a tug of war in the tradition of the Mighty Men of Zorra (look it up...), and I'll tell you that was hard work, but a good laugh.

2019-2022 Strategic Plan Public Meetings were held in Embro on July 9th and Thamesford on July 11th. There was some excellent input from residents and hopefully by the time you read this that input will have been incorporated in the plan and passed by Council and that will allow Staff to get to work implementing it. 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). It is a "living document" though, and can be updated as circumstances change or new ideas come forward.

The Township is still working on potential plans for the former Maple Leaf property in Thamesford. At the time of writing Council has not made a final decision to proceed with the Thamesford Redevelopment project. The intent is to achieve the housing, commercial, and growth that will make living and doing business in Zorra better. The Strategic Plan goals mentioned above will be one of the guides as to how and if this project proceeds. So the Township is considering purchasing the land and then re-selling it to a developer(s) who have responded to a Request for Proposal (RFP) issued by the Township. The developer(s) who best satisfies that RFP would be awarded the deal IF Council decides to proceed. 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. If Council decides to proceed there will be a public meeting to review conceptual plans before a formal Public Meeting to review the development. Staff continue to work hard on this and I am cautiously optimistic that we may be able to proceed with something this year, but only if there is no net debt and no undue risk.

The Oxford County Federation of Agriculture (OCFA) put on an excellent Farm Tour available to all Oxford County Council members (including area municipalities). It was a great opportunity to visit farms I have not been to and talk with the Federation, members, and Ag business owners about challenges and opportunities from their perspective in Oxford.

On June 24 I attended a meeting of the Top Aggregate Producing Municipalities of Ontario (Zorra is fifth) and the Ontario Stone, Sand & Gravel Association. We need better regulation of pit activities like haul routes, and a higher levy \$/tonne to compensate Zorra residents for the wear on our roads due to aggregate operations. Zorra has been working on this for years with TAPMO with some moderate success, but we need to keep lobbying the Ministry of Natural Resources to make the changes we need.

The Farm Tax Ratio is an issue I have written about here before and it continues to frustrate me. In 2018 Oxford County Council rightly reduced the ratio from 0.25 (of residential) to 0.23 in the face of skyrocketing farmland tax assessments. This year I was unsuccessful in getting it lowered again. As a result, even though both Township and County budgets increased, some residential property owners will actually see a decrease in their property tax bill because the increased farm assessment has farmers paying more

than their fare share. The Tax Ratio is a tool that municipalities have specifically to address this issue. On June 26 Oxford County Council created a new Ad Hoc (temporary) Committee to review Oxford County's tax ratio policy and recommend best practices going forward. I am on this new Committee.

We continue to strive to make Zorra better by doing our part. Zorra is 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:

Marcus Ryan, Mayor
P. 519.485.2490 or 1.888.699.3868
M:1.519.301.1634
mryan@zorra.on.ca