

Town hits brakes on new Admin Centre pending Province's Regional review

By Kira Wronska Dorward

The April 15 Meeting of the Whole Committee Working Session, ostensibly to discuss proceeding with the proposed Administration Centre, resulted in surprising revelations about the state of provincial-municipal relations and what residents might be able to expect in the upcoming months.

CAO Blaine Parkins began the discussion with a joke about the '127-slide' presentation on the contentious Administration Centre issue, highlighting just how controversial the issue has been these past months.

He addressed current challenges, such as 'deteriorating assets that require increased capital, such as the current Town Hall on Wellington Street in Alliston, which requires repairs to leaking windows and the roof, among other things.

'When you start to look at some of the costs bits in a building of this age and nature, it leads you to question the feasibility of the project,' he concluded.

Parkins also addressed other issues such as accessibility to 10 Wellington, and communal growth, stating that the municipality desired it to be 'an evolution versus just growth' it has to impact space, it has to service customers.'

The emphasis for Blaine was how these existing and proposed communal spaces serve its customers.

He mentioned in regards to the proposed Administration Centre space on Albert Avenue, that alternatives are being considered, and harkened back to Council discussion in October 2016 that looked at what was important in a new administration space, namely a 'balance between capital and ongoing operational potential.'

He cited a visioning report that had been created by an architectural firm hired by Council.

He also repeated the theme of creating a new cost-effective community hub that would provide the backbone of a future public transportation system.

'We are giving our customers a destination to go to,' emphasized Parkins.

'What does efficient customer service look like?' he asked. 'How important is a green space?' These are just a few of the considerations before Council. Other, more practical ones

include integration, accessibility, site servicing, project duration, and timeline to occupancy.

?We are looking to maximize the space we do have,? said Parkins, ?at all our facilities, in the interim.?

These considerations aside, the very real and imminent obstacle posed by the province's Regional Government Review and its potential impact was brought to the fore by Deputy Mayor Norcross.

Norcross immediately advocated for a motion to cease all activity on construction of the new Administration Centre, ?given the magnitude [of potential changes] and given that we don't have an idea of what the outcome [of the Review] will be.?

Deputy Mayor went on to say that Simcoe County could face significant restructuring, with elimination of duplication and inefficiencies of services in the next year.

?It's based on rumour, it's based on perception?what we know is that the make-up of Simcoe County will change?Fact: we do not know when they will be or when the Party will implement them.?

Norcross went on to say that ?rumblings? from the rumour mill are saying these changes could come into effect as soon as June, with bills being passed through Parliament in the fall. He also went on to highlight that the provincial government is not asking for municipal input or consultation.

?We don't know what's going to happen, we don't know what the regional makeup will look like, and we have not been asked to participate in any manner?we believe there is already a plan in place and they are humouring us.?

Norcross went onto illuminate to the audience that the province only invited Mayor Milne to a fifteen minute discussion behind closed doors, excluding the Deputy Mayor, that mostly had to do with pointing at a map of Simcoe County and making vague allusions.

?The end result is we are going to receive a bill, saying this is how it's going to happen?we are flying blind here.?

The Deputy Mayor and Mayor were advocating for a ?step back? on a decision on the Administration Centre until the Regional Review is released.

?I think right now
it's premature to go forward in any capacity?until we know what this region is
going to look like.?

The CAO commented that
we may hear of these changes as early as mid-year, with them being implemented
at the end of the year. In that event, said Parkins, Council should consider
implementing changes and going ahead with construction projects with the aim of
seeing the Town through until the next election. That includes the possibility
of leasing spaces for the next three to five years, since use of designated
municipal space is currently at capacity, and reconstruction of 10 Wellington.

Addressing the issues
presented by the construction site on Albert Street, where there have been
significant problems with vandalism and arson and ?an almost weekly challenge
to keep the site secure?, the CAO reminded Council and the public that all
hazardous materials had been removed and the site was ready for construction.

The Deputy Mayor
commented that he wasn't sure ?anybody was going to need [the Administration
Centre? if there was an imminent amalgamation of services and municipalities
pending this Review.

It could very well be,
he pointed out, that New Tecumseth ends up as part of a single tier government.

?There are different
agendas that are being pushed,? he concluded.

Councillor
Harrison-MacIntyre questioned why the provincial government would eliminate the
need for a new Administration Centre if an amalgamation of the region does
happen.

In response,
Councillor MacLellan replied that there is ?so much unknown here, moving
forward with a project of this size is a waste of taxpayers' money?we may get
amalgamated with other regions who will help fund this Administration Centre.?

Councillor Noye asked
the question that if amalgamation were to take place, would the Town's assets
be frozen, as happened in the 1990s, to which the CAO responded that it was
more than likely.

Deputy Mayor Norcross
then put forward a motion to stop construction on the Administration Centre at
25 Albert Street in addition halting all current proposed building projects.

Councillor MacLellan

objected, stating, "our residents aren't going anywhere" and "slamming on the brakes" on all projects, including the irrigation project currently underway, was not practical. "Water is one of the essential services, and we need to ensure that it is there for the Town and meeting quality standards," she admonished.

CAO Parkins reinforced that some work does need to happen and progress.

Councillor Lacey then put forward a request that staff come back with a list of essential services and building projects for Council to review.

A revised motion was then put forward, advocating for the halting of construction on the Administration Centre pending the results of the Regional Government Review, that staff come back with a list of essential services and building projects for Council to review and vote on in order of priority at a future date, and that alternatives options for the Albert Street site and municipal leasing spaces for the next three to five years be investigated by staff. Council passed the motion unanimously and the meeting adjourned at 7:59 pm.