

## Town continuing battle against COVID-19

The Town of New Tecumseth has made rapid changes to the way its operating and delivering services since COVID-19 was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization on March 11.

Council meetings are taking place via video chat, staff are being redeployed, and Town-owned buildings, recreation facilities, and park amenities are closed. Park spaces, however, remain accessible when used in accordance with Ontario's directives for COVID-19.

The Town's bylaw services are now working in conjunction with the Ontario Provincial Police (OPP) to enforce and provide education around the Province's directives when necessary.

"Up until yesterday, we've had 51 [COVID-19 related] concerns received through both our office and the OPP's office," noted Town CAO Blaine Parkin at Monday night's council meeting, which was held for the first time over Zoom.

He said there's been 46 educational occurrences between the public and OPP during patrols and no charges have been laid, but six warnings have been issued.

"Our community, I would say at this point in time is being extremely cooperative in working with us and understanding the importance of the public health directives and certainly taking care of each other and looking after themselves," Parkin stressed.

"I know it's been a great variation from many people's normal processes and normal daily life, but our community has responded tremendously and continue to support each other."

The Town continues to provide the vast majority of its services at a similar level of service or slightly under what was offered before the pandemic, according to Parkin.

"Operational staff continue to provide services to the community although modified in some instances," he said. "Those modifications are to essentially adhere to provincial and public health directives."

The Town was initially anticipating a 30 to 50 percent reduction in staff from the virus and due to reduced services it has suspended employment for about 90 part-time and contract employees, which account for 10 percent of overall salary expenditures.

This week, the municipality is going to assess lay-offs for full-time employees.

"All recruitment has been stopped for vacancies and new positions, there's no seasonal hires to date," Parkin noted. "To give you an example of what that implies or what that results in, an example would be our parks staff. We're usually at this time of year staffed up to 30 parks employees ? right now there's six."

Going forward, the municipality will evaluate work sharing programs through the federal government for employment options, according to Parkin.

When looking at financial projections forecasted to August, the Town faces an overall revenue decrease of \$1.87 million, however the overall salary cost decrease is \$1.64 million, due to hiring freezes.

Other cost savings come from the elimination of travelling to attend annual conferences, staff training, and contracting services.

From an operational perspective, cleaning contracts have been cancelled, as Town staff have been redeployed to clean work spaces everyday to be compliant with the public health unit, which also lowers costs.

As well, when looking at the Town's pool facility, its revenue is about \$90,000 while salaries are almost double that cost and day camp revenues are \$80,000, while salaries are \$103,000, making it cost-effective to cancel those programs.

?Any services like that we've opted at this point in time to delay, if not cancel completely throughout the summer months, we actually end up with improvements to our bottom line,? Parkin explained.

Meanwhile, municipalities are looking to see if the Federal government's recovery strategy from COVID-19 may involve funding for shovel ready projects.

Parkin said the Town will want to best position itself for that type of funding through 2020 and 2021.

?We'll be closely monitoring that and continue to review our capital plan to ensure we move forward with the most critical projects,? Parkin said.

Looking ahead to the 2021 budget, he stressed that it will be respectful of the financial situation faced by residents and business.

**By Sam Odrowski**Local Journalism Initiative Reporter