

Mayor's Blog – August 20, 2020

As I write this there have been zero active COVID19 cases in Zorra for months, but a recent small rise in Oxford and the Southwestern Public Health region.

Zorra Staff continue to consult regularly with Southwestern Public Health about how to safely re-open, please follow Township social media, website, and signs. Remember that all the controls have been to flatten the curve, not to prevent any and all transmission, that is not possible. Public Health experts are now actively preparing for a likely “second wave” as the weather cools, more people move into closed spaces, and school returns.

Part of that preparation was that on July 30th Southwestern Public Health issued a letter of instruction for all businesses and organizations across our region to mandate face coverings. Under that letter wearing face coverings in enclosed public spaces is now the law. Remember, face coverings do not replace physical distancing, and do not protect the wearer, they protect others. Please be kind toward people who cannot wear one for health reasons. Visit www.swpublichealth.ca/facecoverings for more information and resources for how to safely wear a face covering.

I'm doing my part by wearing a face covering to protect my community.

At the August Council meeting Zorra decided to start an eight-month trial of office staff working a compressed work week. The municipal office will still be open Monday to Friday, but earlier in the morning and later in the afternoon to serve you better. It's the same total hours of work for staff, so no extra cost, increased hours of availability for residents, increased flexibility for staff to allow us to attract and retain the best staff possible in the future while facing a province wide wave of staff retirements. I think this is the efficiency in government people are looking for. Efficiency in government doesn't always look as fancy as people imagine it, this is what it looks like. Staff are going to evaluate it, we are working to have it evaluated by a student in the Local Government Program at Western, and most importantly we will be listening to residents for their feedback.

On August 12th I received a letter from the Minister of Municipal Affairs informing me that the Township of Zorra will receive a payment of \$207,300 to support COVID-19 operating costs and pressures. We will be putting that in reserves to be used specifically to offset either increased costs, or lost revenues, related to COVID-19.

This year's Association of Municipalities of Ontario conference was virtual due to COVID, so it was strange and lacked the in-person opportunities to work with other municipalities on common issues. Nevertheless, Zorra made delegations on several key issues.

I was pleased to lead the delegation on behalf of the Township of Zorra and the Community Schools Alliance speaking up for our community's schools to the Ministry of Education. We emphasized the importance of rural and northern schools to their communities and made an offer to help develop policies for ending the province wide moratorium on school closures while protecting our small rural schools.

I also made a delegation as a member of the Top Aggregate Producing Municipalities of Ontario (TAPMO) to the Ministry of Finance (MOF) to present options for an equitable approach to property tax assessment, so that aggregate properties (gravel pits and quarries) can be taxed fairly. The Municipal Property Assessment Corporation's (MPAC) current property tax valuation assesses gravel pits at a rate far less than single family homes and small businesses. This sets an artificial cap on their property valuations – costing areas like Zorra Township hundreds of thousands in tax revenue and shifting that tax burden onto residents.

In Zorra Township, typical industrial properties are assessed at between \$19,000 and \$26,000 per acre while aggregate operations are assessed only \$8,000 per acre. If aggregate operations were assessed at the low end of typical industrial property, it would mean almost \$1 million/year in additional tax revenue to address Zorra's prematurely aging road system due to over 50 aggregate operations.

Councillor Davies and I made a delegation to the Ministry of Environment, Conservation, and Parks and Oxford MPP Ernie Hardeman asking for clarity on the legislation and regulation in Bill 197 giving municipalities the right to decide if they want a landfill or not. It is clear that when asked by a proponent, a municipality can simply pass a resolution.

The coming months will be a challenge for all of us as we continue to re-open services and businesses and our children return to school under strange circumstances. Please continue to help each other out as you have so far. We are not "lucky" that we have done well in this pandemic, we have done well because all of you have done your part to help each other out. You have followed the advice of public health experts. I have seen people make more than enough masks for every person in the Township. I have seen people offer to do groceries and drop off yard waste for strangers. I have seen people creatively and safely continue raise funds for community projects. Please keep doing those things.

Please be calm, be kind, be safe, and do your part. I know you can, I have seen it.

As always, please feel free to contact me on any issue:

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