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CAO on hot seat; Councillors demand answers on slow city response times

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Kawartha Lakes Chief Administrative Officer Ron Taylor said the city’s priority was “cost containment,” not maintaining pre-pandemic level city services, at a recent council meeting.

The CAO was responding to councillors who were not happy with city response times or city services after fielding many calls from their constituents.

Councillor Pat Dunn wanted to know why city staff working from home were not returning messages in a timely manner, and why all calls to those individuals' phone numbers went directly to voice mail.

"Employees working from home should be treated no differently than councillors who are regularly contacted at home when the city re-routes calls to their cell phones," Dunn suggested.

Taylor said hopefully those city workers working from home "are only a temporary situation. "We are working hard to ensure that the public receives a 48 hour turn around on all calls and e-mails."

He told Dunn that the city call forwarding system only connects to city-issued technology, not to staff member's home lines.

Dunn told council he is receiving two to three calls a day from people complaining that city departments are not getting back to them, and that the level of municipal service is not what it used to be.

The councillor also pressed the CAO about the still-shuttered Lindsay Service Centre, a back log of unanswered complaints logged with by-law enforcement and the continued city contribution towards the salaries of four court security staff that have nothing to do for months with the courts closed until at least October 19.

"City positions that have needed to be filled

have not been filled," Taylor said, "and with 80 summer staff not hired, departments like by-law have fallen behind."

Taylor said the city is "recruiting as we speak and hope to have people in place after Thanksgiving. We will then start methodically to chip away at these back logs to get caught up."

Mayor Andy Letham promised Dunn he would bring up the issue of the court security officers and their deployment at the next meeting of the Police Services Board.



COUNCILLOR DOUG ELMSLIE.

Councillor Doug Elmslie continued the questioning of Taylor about "the frustrating time in getting a city response."

"People are upset," Elmslie said, "and some are suggesting they are simply not getting any response from the city about their requests."

Elmslie then segued to the issue of landfill sites.

“People are also angry about waiting at landfill sites for 30-90 minutes to unload material for which there is no charge. Contractors can’t afford this. There have to be simple fixes available and available now.”

“There are more people living here full time than ever before,” the Fenelon area councillor stated, “and the snowbirds aren’t going away this winter. Are we ready for the additional workload this winter? It is time to have this discussion now.”

Councillor Ron Ashmore shared that he, on behalf of constituents, has 138 active case files open with the city and 10 more open with bylaw enforcement, and has no answers on any of them.

“People are waiting for solutions,” Ashmore told the CAO.

Taylor said decision had to be made. “Many of these things are not going to be solved right now. We had to try to prioritize public requests. Cost containment has been the priority during this pandemic.”

Councillor Andrew Veale said “everyone, I think, understands issues connected to COVID. We need to remember that response issues existed long before COVID.”

Councillor Pat O’Reilly wanted more information from Taylor regarding arenas and arena usage in Kawartha Lakes.

“Uxbridge has just announced that they are not putting ice into their arena. Port Perry

may not have minor hockey at all this winter. What is going on locally?” O’Reilly wondered.

Letham and Veale answered that query sharing with council that minor hockey has made the decision that teams will not be allowed to travel outside their health unit. There might be overlap between health regions with adult hockey, but this winter most players won’t be travelling too far from home.

Councillor Kathleen Seymour-Fagan wanted to know if there is any other city staff still awaiting recall considering the backlog some city departments are facing.

“No layoffs exist except a handful in the aquatics department,” Taylor said, “and the 40 staff we have on voluntary leave are all returning by September 30.”

Earlier in the meeting Taylor had sketched out his monthly city pandemic update, emphasizing the city has only focused on essential services and the “financial sustainability of the municipality.”

Taylor suggested that in the long term the city is going to have to take a look at service enhancements, innovations, modernizations, process improvements and how services were delivered during the pandemic.

“Some decisions made during the pandemic about service delivery may remain in place,” Taylor mused, “if it maximizes the taxpayer’s money.”

Taylor continued by telling council that the extended provincial orders remain in effect until Sept. 22, and he expects that they will likely remain in place for the foreseeable future.

He added locally the Emergency Response Centre is still active and meeting keeping a close eye on the local health situation.

The CAO told council that with regular meetings now occurring, the delegated authority given to him by council at the height of the pandemic should be rescinded.

“I expect that we will remain at Stage 3 of the provincial re-opening plan for a while,” Taylor suggested, “and that the limitation on large gatherings will continue.”

Most municipal services including libraries, arenas and community centres are open or soon to open with health and safety

restrictions and arenas will have limited change room access and spectators capped at 50, he said.

Logie Street Park opens on Sept. 21, complete with washrooms, a zip line, splash pad, and ice trail for skating which may open this year, weather permitting.

The CAO suggested that as the city continues to re-open there are three problems that are top of mind for staff: safe and secure cash handling, the opening of additional service counters, particularly in Lindsay, and how to allow for public attendance at municipal meetings and for resident/staff interaction so various projects can get approved.

Financially, Taylor predicted “a break-even budget made possible by cost containment and limiting services.”

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Kirk is a retired high school history teacher and coach who has had a lifelong interest in politics at all levels. Since retiring, Kirk has spent the last three years doing freelance writing of all kinds for various platforms. Kirk can often be found sitting in the press gallery at City Hall observing and reporting on the vagaries of local government.

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