



## AGENDA ITEM REPORT

**Meeting:** Special Meeting of Council - 06 Apr 2020  
**To:** Members of Council  
**From:** David Stewart, CAO/Treasurer  
**Department:** Administration  
**Subject:** COVID-19 Preparation - Hastings Highlands Business Continuity Plan

### RECOMMENDATION:

THAT Council accepts this report "COVID-19 Preparation - Hastings Highlands Business Continuity Plan" as submitted by the CAO/Treasurer; as information;

FURTHERMORE THAT Council approves the April 1, 2020, May 1, 2020 and June 1, 2020 penalties applied to overdue 2020 property tax accounts be waived due to the COVID-19 event; and

THAT Council approves the waiving of April 2020, May 2020 and June 2020 penalty on accounts receivable amounts past due, due to the COVID-19 event; and

THAT Council approves the property tax installment due date of May 19, 2020 be extended to June 23, 2020 due to the COVID-19 event.

### ORIGIN:

The threat posed by COVID-19 to both the community and to the Corporation is significant. This report focuses upon the Corporation of the Municipality of Hastings Highlands' efforts to mitigate risk and attempt to ensure service continuity. Protection of the health and safety for staff is paramount, and guides the decisions discussed in the body of this report. Within the context of minimizing health risks, municipal staff play an important role in supporting Hastings Highlands' economy and are trying to offer services while minimizing physical contact. The plans for each part of the Corporation are detailed below.

### BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Municipal Services have been included as essential services as defined by the Province of Ontario during this COVID-19 event (O Reg 82/20 Order 7.0.2 (4) Under Section 1 (5)). As a result, Municipal staff have prepared this report to outline how municipal business and operations will continue during these times. Note that the expectation is that when the Province of Ontario lifts/cancels the state of emergency declaration (O Reg 50/20 Pursuant to Section 7.0.1 of the *Emergency Management and Civil Protection Act*) all Hastings Highlands operations would revert to normal operations.

Since the Municipal Emergency Control Group (MECG) in Hastings Highlands was partially activated on March 13th, there have been regular meetings to discuss the processes to ensure the safety and

well-being of the community and the Corporation. In addition, the group has met and reviewed all the operations of the municipality to develop and implement a Business Continuity Plan for the COVID-19 event. The threat posed by COVID-19 to both the community and to the Corporation is significant. This report focuses on Hastings Highlands' efforts to mitigate and attempt to ensure service continuity.

### **CAO's OFFICE:**

In addition to leading the business continuity exercise, the CAO's office is responsible for the overall management of the operations of the municipality. A primary focus has been making sure that communication is regular and consistent to Council, staff and members of the community so that everyone is kept as up to date as possible during this COVID-19 event.

Each day, the CAO has prepared an agenda and has led the MECG meetings. In addition, the CAO catalogues any updates and information provided to Hastings Highlands by various agencies.

The CAO/Treasurer is working at the municipal office so that he is able to access any and all resources that may be required in a given day to support Council, staff and all members of the community during the COVID-19 event.

### **IT SERVICES:**

The Municipality of Hastings Highlands IT services are provided by Hastings County. Hastings Highlands has invested a lot of time and resources into IT upgrades over the last several years to update and upgrade functionality for both Council and staff. IT has implemented networks that provide staff with the capability of completing work either remotely or from home all while still ensuring security and privacy of data. This has proven to be extremely resourceful during these times of need and the Municipality will continue to work with the County to ensure we have the IT infrastructure required to service the public.

### **HASTINGS HIGHLANDS WEBSITE & SOCIAL MEDIA:**

The Municipality of Hastings Highlands has created a separate COVID-19 information page on the homepage of the municipality's website [www.hastingshighlands.ca](http://www.hastingshighlands.ca). This page will be used as the municipality's source of credible information that is available in one location to website guests.

Hastings Highlands continues to use corporate social media as a vehicle to disseminate the municipality's COVID-19 planning and communications information to followers.

### **MUNICIPAL CLERK'S OFFICE:**

There may be a need to postpone/suspend Council and Committee meetings. Additionally, there may be a need to suspend Council and Committee meetings if the Municipality is mandated to do so by the Provincial or Federal governments.

On March 19, 2020, *The Municipal Act, 2001* was amended to provide that, during emergencies, should they choose to, members of councils, local boards and committees who participate electronically in open and closed meetings may be counted for purposes of quorum. This will ensure

that the ongoing business of municipal governments can continue without the need to meet in person, particularly given the requirements of social distancing to curb the spread of the COVID-19 virus.

On April 6, 2020, a bylaw is being presented for Council's consideration to amend the Municipality's Procedure Bylaw to permit meetings to be held electronically during an emergency declared pursuant to the *Emergency Management and Civil Protection Act*. An Electronic Meeting will mean a meeting called and held in full or in part via electronic means (including but not limited to audio teleconference, video teleconference, or via means of the internet), and with or without in-person attendance.

*The Municipal Act* specifies requirements for open meetings to ensure that most municipal business is conducted transparently, and with access for and in view of the public. There are limited circumstances under the *Municipal Act* when municipal meetings can be conducted in closed session. Meetings held under these new provisions would still be required to follow existing meeting rules including providing of notice of meetings to the public, maintaining meeting minutes, and subject to certain exceptions, that meetings continue to be open to the public.

### **In-Person Public Interaction**

The Clerk's office is one of the main points of contact for the public in many aspects of work which requires face to face interactions with the public, including issuance of licence documents, Commissioner of Oath services, issuance of burial permits, lottery licence interactions with the non-profit groups and general public enquiry engagement. Four staff members are Commissioners for Taking Affidavits. The signing of Burial permits is by appointment. Any other services as noted above will be evaluated based on circumstances and needs.

### **Cemetery Services**

Cemetery services are considered an essential service and will continue as normal. Cemeteries do not open for burials until May 1, 2020 for Grace Cemetery and for Papineau Cemetery it is weather permitting.

### **FINANCE SERVICES:**

The Finance Team has reviewed processes to determine essential tasks that need to be performed on an on-going basis. Those items are listed below:

#### **Payroll**

It is essential that staff continue to be paid on a regular bi-weekly basis. The Financial Analyst – Payables is not able to work from home, so she is working at the municipal office. Both the Deputy Treasurer and the CAO/Treasurer are available to review and approve payroll when required. Due to the security and confidentiality associated with this function it is not something that can be completed remotely or at home.

#### **Accounts Payable**

The Municipality processes payments to vendors on a bi-weekly basis. Generally, the Municipality follows a net 30 policy, meaning that invoices are paid 30 days after receipt. It is important that the Financial Analyst – Payables completes these bi-weekly batches so that the Municipality does not

incur any unnecessary penalty and interest charges. Both the Deputy Treasurer and the CAO/Treasurer are available to review and approve payments when required.

### **Collection of Property Tax Payments**

It is essential that staff continue to process property tax payments and property tax bills. This function cannot be done remotely or at home. The Financial Analyst – Receivables and Taxes is not able to work from home so she is working at the municipal office. The Municipality accepts payments via on-line banking, on-line credit cards, paying at the bank, through regular mail and telephone banking. At the present time, as the municipal office is closed to the Public, payments by cash or cheques are being accepted through a drop box alternative located at the municipal office.

The first of four property tax installment due dates was on March 24, 2020. The next due date for taxes is May 19, 2020 and all bills have been sent out. The final tax bills are typically mailed out at mid-July, with installment due dates being August 18, 2020 and October 20, 2020.

In addition, it is important that staff stay on top of the processing of cash receipts, property ownership changes, Municipal Property Assessment Corporation (MPAC) property assessment changes and the processing of information related to property sales and purchases.

### **Property Tax Sales**

The Municipality has been advised by the third-party collection company it uses that all property tax sales that were scheduled in Hastings Highlands for 2020 have been postponed until further notice.

### **Property Tax 2021 Reassessment**

The Province of Ontario's Action Plan: Responding to COVID-19 included a section on 2021 property tax reassessment.

The government is postponing the planned property tax reassessment for 2021. Postponing the reassessment means that property assessments for the 2021 taxation year will continue to be based on the same valuation date that was in effect for the 2020 taxation year. The Municipal Property Assessment Corporation (MPAC) will continue to maintain the assessment roll and ensure that it is updated to reflect changes such as new construction.

### **Accounts Receivable**

Staff send out invoices as required. The majority of the invoices sent out relate to the nine municipal waste site tipping fees. This is a process that must be done at the municipal office.

### **External Reporting**

All reporting that was due as of March 31 has been processed without any issues. This includes the following: Month End Bank Reconciliations, HST (Harmonized Sales Tax), WSIB annual report, EHT (Employer Health Tax) annual report and annual Federal and Provincial Gas Tax Reporting.

### **2019 Financial Statements and Audit**

The Municipality continues to work with the auditors to prepare the 2019 financial statements. The Municipality's on-site portion of the audit has already occurred, so Hastings Highlands is not expecting any delays associated with preparing the statements from our end at this time.

## **Assistance to Residents**

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in financial challenges and uncertainty to the residents of Hastings Highlands as many are faced with loss of work and business closures.

Following the lead of the Government of Canada, the Province of Ontario and the County of Hastings, the Municipality has been researching alternatives that could be extended to residents to provide relief. Staff is proposing the following:

1. Staff is proposing that the April 1, 2020, May 1, 2020 and June 1, 2020 penalties applied to overdue 2020 property tax accounts be waived.
2. Staff is proposing the waiving of April 2020, May 2020 and June 2020 penalty on accounts receivable amounts past due.
3. Staff is proposing the property tax installment due date of May 19, 2020 be extended to June 23, 2020.

As Council is aware, the Municipality bills and collects taxes on behalf of the Upper Tier - County of Hastings and the Ministry of Finance - Education School Boards. The March 31 payment to the County of Hastings has been extended to April 30, 2020. The payment dates to the Ministry of Finance – Education School Boards are outlined in the *Education Act*, with the following due dates – March 31, June 30, September 30 and December 15. At the time this report was written the Province of Ontario's Action Plan: Responding to COVID-19 included a 90-day deferral to the June 30 and September 30 payments to the Ministry of Finance – Education School Boards.

## **FIRE SERVICES:**

### **Fire Administration**

Administration is provided by the Fire Chief, Deputy Chief and Administrative Coordinator, the administration is still fully functioning through remote computer access.

### **Fire Chief**

The Fire Chief replaced by the Deputy Chief should the Fire Chief need to be in isolation. The Fire Chief and Deputy Chief have segregated from each other and are working from home. They are working two weeks on call; two weeks off call with regular weekly hours while working from home and meeting through remote access points.

The Fire Chief is the Municipality's Alternate Community Emergency Management Co-Ordinator (Alternate CEMC) and with this role we have partially activated the Municipality's Emergency Control Group. The meetings can be held more frequently if required, to look after the health and well-being of municipal staff and residents of Hastings Highlands.

## **Fire Suppression and Rescue**

The Municipality of Hastings Highlands has 63 firefighters and officers, the majority of whom are all volunteer. The Fire Chief, Deputy Chief and Administrative Coordinator are the only full-time employees within the fire department.

Response service could be impacted due to the very nature of the firefighters being volunteer and their ability and freedom to respond, as well as the significant level of unknowns that impact the firefighters' commitments to their employers and families.

The fire department management has taken necessary precautions to stop potential spread of the virus by cancelling all weekly station meetings and training to maintain social and physical distancing. The apparatus and equipment are still checked weekly at each station by an officer and a firefighter (only two people) who maintain physical distancing throughout the check process. One marks the check lists while the other checks and runs the apparatus and equipment.

During all incidents and responses, the firefighters and officers will always minimize direct contact with each other and the general public maintaining social and physical distancing as much as possible given the risky circumstances.

## **Fire Ban**

The Province of Ontario has instated a "Restricted Fire Zone" across the province. Hastings Highlands Fire Department has implemented a "Total Fire Ban" that is more restrictive in some aspects. The objective is to have no chance of starting a brush, grass or wild fire through any type of open flame and put responding firefighters at added exposure and risk during this COVID 19 pandemic. *The Fire Protection and Prevention Act* and Ontario Fire Code permit municipal bylaws to be more restrictive than a Restricted Fire Zone but not less restrictive.

## **BUILDING DEPARTMENT:**

The Building Department can receive building permit applications and plans digitally, minimizing the need for builders/designers/applicants to have to come to the Municipal Office to make applications. Plan review and application review can occur based on electronic drawings. Inquiries and correspondence can be issued via email or telephone to minimize public inquires in person. Alternatively, while the Municipal Office is closed to the public, building permit applications may be mailed in or dropped off at the Municipal Office by prior arrangement. Arrangements are to be made by emailing Martin Cox at [mcox@hastingshighlands.ca](mailto:mcox@hastingshighlands.ca). You will be provided with a time for drop off and a member of staff will meet you.

Alternatively, use the mailbox located on the Hastings Highlands Library wall, adjacent to the main entrance of the Hastings Highlands Complex. Any mailed in or hand delivered permit applications will have a one-week time lag from the date the packages are delivered to the Municipal Office to the start of the pre-screening.

## **Site Inspections: New Construction**

The Building Department will be inspecting in person new construction sites only.

The Building Department staff will not be entering occupied area of buildings under construction including personal dwellings or occupied areas of industrial, commercial, multi - residential and institutional buildings. Details on inspections for previously occupied areas are listed in “Site Inspections: Occupied Buildings” below.

Inspection staff may ask you to answer brief, non-intrusive screening questions related to the COVID-19 health risks, and practice social distancing. Please understand this is for the protection and peace of mind of our staff who will be serving you and other members of the public.

Building inspections are to be booked by emailing Martin Cox [mcox@hastingshighlands.ca](mailto:mcox@hastingshighlands.ca) or by calling 613 338 2811 extension 255.

### **Site Inspections: Occupied Buildings**

The Building Department staff will not be entering occupied areas of buildings under construction including personal dwellings or occupied areas of industrial, commercial, multi - residential and institutional buildings.

The Building Department will review emailed quality photos and videos or inspect via video calls on programs such as Facetime and What’s App. The Building Department will email the owner or builder an inspection report stating whether the inspection is satisfactory or list deficiencies. Any deficiencies can be reviewed at a later date by the same methods.

Building inspections are to be booked by emailing Martin Cox [mcox@hastingshighlands.ca](mailto:mcox@hastingshighlands.ca) or by calling 613 338 2811 extension 255.

### **PLANNING DEPARTMENT:**

The Planning Department staff normally meet regularly with the public at the counter and in project meetings and in public meeting settings. Meetings will be done by telephone and with computer technology as much as possible and the public is encouraged to make inquires via telephone and email in an effort to minimize public contact and maintain service levels.

At this time, one Shore Road Allowance will be on the Council meeting agenda that is scheduled for April 8, 2020. Staff will post a future meeting schedule on the Municipal website when known.

Planning Staff regularly host pre-consultation meetings by appointment. These meetings are attended by staff from other departments, i.e. Operations, Building, Fire and agencies as well as applicants and consultants. In-person meetings are not being scheduled until at least May 4, 2020, in light of social distancing. Ideally, if required, these meetings and/or some of the participants can meet by teleconference.

The Planning Department can be contacted by emailing Cathy Bujas [cbujas@hastingshighlands.ca](mailto:cbujas@hastingshighlands.ca) or by calling 613 338 2811 extension 222.

Long Term Planning – Comprehensive Zoning Bylaw Update

Staff will continue to work on the review and updating of the Comprehensive Zoning Bylaw.

## **Committee of Adjustment Public Hearings**

The Committee of Adjustment, being a local board under the provisions of the *Municipal Act*, is bound by the same rules as Council regarding attendance electronically at a meeting. The Municipality is amending the procedure bylaw of the Committee of Adjustment to include electronic meetings. If meetings are cancelled or will be electronic (May 6, 2020 is the next scheduled meeting) all persons required to be notified will be so advised.

### **BYLAW ENFORCEMENT DEPARTMENT:**

Staff continue to take calls regarding bylaw enforcement.

There will be no site inspections for bylaw enforcement until further notice.

The Bylaw Enforcement Department can be contacted by emailing Dawn Bowers [dbowers@hastingshighlands.ca](mailto:dbowers@hastingshighlands.ca)

### **ROADS, WASTE SITES AND FACILITIES OPERATIONS:**

In preparation for the viral pandemic, the Operations Department has developed plans to maintain municipal operations and infrastructure at a minimum service level, while ensuring that the roads are safe for travel. Work related to road network safety, and emergency responses to severe weather will receive the highest priority while other work will be completed based on available staff and public safety.

The Operations Department have implemented time and/or spatial separation for our road's management and road/waste staff in order to meet service level requirements, and ensuring business continuity, while reducing risk.

The Core Services that will be maintained during this period:

- Road network maintenance in accordance with Minimum Maintenance Standards (MMS)
- Emergency roadwork
- Severe Weather & Public Safety

To ensure the delivery, the Operations Department has its full complement of staff, Operations Manager and two Operations Supervisors available.

All Municipal Waste Sites are operating on normal schedules. Waste Site Attendants are asked not to have any social interaction with the public and are always implementing social distancing and wearing Personal Protective Equipment.

All Municipal Facilities are closed for public use and are being monitored by staff periodically. The Operations Department will make every attempt to maintain the road network as per the Minimum Maintenance Standard (MMS) including road patrolling, pothole filling, winter maintenance and regulatory sign repair. Under the MMS, roads are classified by their traffic volume and posted speed limit. Road work will follow the MMS and be focused on the higher road classes or roads with the highest traffic volume first. Downed limbs and trees are the most common result of severe weather events. Priority will be placed on removing debris from roads. With respect to the operation and level

of service provided by our Operations Department, the Municipality has also implemented time and spatial separation.

### **Facilities/Playground Structure**

All Community Centres and Recreation Facilities are closed for public use. Signs have been put in place at all entrance and exit points to make the public aware of the facilities closures.

As of March 23, 2020, signs have been posted on all playground equipment advising the public not to use the playground equipment as it will not be cleaned and/or sanitized.

### **Municipal Office**

Effective at 08:00 on March 16, 2020, the Municipal Office was closed until April 5, 2020 for public walk-in entry. Services to our residents are available over the phone and through email. This closure will continue to be assessed and may be extended.

### **Enhanced COVID-19 Cleaning Procedures**

Enhanced cleaning procedures have been put in place to safeguard staff that are currently working.

### **Work From Home Provisions**

Employees who are able to work from home have been asked to do so. Employees whose jobs permit them to work from home come with the expectation that they are available to their manager during work hours to get updates or provide support. Department Heads will monitor the effectiveness of work from home arrangements balanced against staff health and safety and adjust accordingly.

### **HASTINGS HIGHLANDS PUBLIC LIBRARY:**

The Hastings Highlands Public Library was closed to the public as of Monday, March 16th, 2020. The CEO and staff are working their regular hours either at home or at the Library, depending upon the nature of the work. The CEO is part of the Municipal Emergency Control Group. This allows library staff to be aligned with the Hastings Highlands Municipal plans during this time. In order to meet the needs of the community, library staff are promoting the library's e-resources through the library's website and Facebook page, thoroughly cleaning the library, reorganizing our collection displays, digitizing historical records and researching various ways to enhance and develop online programs for the days ahead.

### **FINANCIAL IMPACT:**

Staff productivity is likely to be reduced. Cost impacts cannot be accurately measured at this time; however, the Municipality is tracking costs associated with COVID-19 response.

Estimated cost associated with waiving the April 2020, May 2020 and June 2020 penalties applied to overdue 2020 property tax accounts and accounts receivable accounts is \$15,000.

### **LINK TO STRATEGIC PLAN:**

Strategic Priority #3 – Build Our Community

## REFERENCES:

### CONCLUSION

This report was prepared March 31, 2020 and based on the information available at that time. As new actions are taken by other levels of government and new information surfaces, this will be modified accordingly. The protection and the health and safety for staff and our community is paramount and has guided all the decisions we have made in terms of business continuity.

#### **Prepared By:**

David Stewart, CAO/Treasurer

**Reviewed By:** Municipal Clerk March 31, 2020

**Reviewed By:** CAO/Treasurer April 1, 2020