

## Mayor's Blog – December 15, 2020

As I write this there are 3 active COVID-19 case in Zorra, 65 in Oxford, and 128 in Southwestern Public Health as a whole.

I will not be celebrating Christmas or new years with people outside my household in my house, and I won't be going to their house. Even if you are not personally worried about COVID-19, please consider that there are people IN OUR COMMUNITY who may have "non-emergency" procedures for heart issues and cancer delayed because of hospital capacity due to coronavirus spreading.

Please continue to #DoYourPart to help prevent the spread of COVID-19, to keep your community healthy, and businesses and services open:

- Stay home if you are sick
- Practice physical distancing by staying at least 2 metres apart
- Wear a face covering when you can't physically distance
- Wash your hands

I was asked to speak at the (virtual) Oxford County Federation of Agriculture AGM, and was happy to give them an update on where Zorra stands with respect to the Ontario Federation of Agriculture's Producing Prosperity Pillars (natural gas, roads and bridges, rural schools, high speed internet). Zorra has been working on with Enbridge on the Provincial Natural Gas Expansion Support Program for some time, and we have a meeting scheduled for January 6 to review progress. This has been slowed at the provincial level by COVID.

Zorra completed a road needs studies for paved and gravel roads and as a result has a new gravel road maintenance program as well as a more aggressive paved road maintenance policy. In the future we need to try to rebuild more gravel roads to a "non half load" status. Aggregate (gravel pits and quarries) operations have a big impact on road needs and finances, and I've made delegations to the Ministry of Finance asking for a more equitable approach to property tax assessment, so that aggregate properties can be taxed fairly. The Municipal Property Assessment Corporation's (MPAC) current property tax valuation methodology sees active aggregate operations assessed at a rate far less than single family homes and small businesses. This costs areas like Zorra hundreds of thousands in tax revenue. 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 a typical industrial property, it would mean almost \$1 million dollars per year in additional tax revenues for the Township. These funds are urgently required to repair and improve Zorra's road system. Due to being home to over 50 aggregate operations, Zorra's road infrastructure is prematurely aging.

Zorra Council passed a resolution in support of my report recommending a School Retention Plan. It was developed in conjunction with my work on the Thames Valley District School Board's (TVDSB) Rural Education Task Force. Among other things the plan recommends that Zorra continue including a school retention plan as part of the Township's Strategic Plan and advocate accordingly, maintain an ongoing membership in the Community Schools Alliance (CSA), recommend that the TVDSB review its policies for capacity planning and pupil accommodation reviews to formally recognize the importance and value to the community of rural and single school community schools,

request communication and notification on an ongoing basis from school boards of any areas of study considering possible consolidation, closure, additions, or new builds. Next step is Oxford County Council and then Elgin, Middlesex, and London. And on high speed internet I gave them the latest on the SWIFT announcement that I covered in a previous column/blog). This plan does not reach everyone, but it is a far better start than I imagined. We now need to develop a plan that can be reasonably funded to reach everyone.

Oxford County Council passed the 2021 budget as follows:

2021 Approved General Levy \$63,724,374 or a 1.4% increase over 2020. However, because of the growth in assessment (new builds) this will result in the “average residential property” valued at \$271,277 paying \$996 of the general levy, which is approximately \$6 less than last year. Township Budget is still being developed to be finalized in February, but I am hoping it will be similar. The education portion of your property tax bill is set by the Provincial Government.

Merry Christmas, happy holidays, happy solstice!

Please be calm, be kind, be safe, and do your part.

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

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