

A fiscally-driven issue

BY PETER RICHARDSON

Shelburne has been involved, in discussions, over retaining the current Shelburne Police Service, or changing to the OPP. For some, it is a highly emotional issue and, like all emotionally charged situations, reality, facts, truth, and common sense are frequently casualties.

The 'don't confuse me with facts, my mind is made up' attitude, appears too often, in the discourse. Deaf Ear Syndrome is circulating amongst the discussions. One vocal opponent to the OPP option has asked Council not to decide the issue on 'fiscal motivations only', however, this is purely a fiscal issue.

All sides in the debate acknowledge that the Shelburne Police Service is doing an excellent job. That point is not at issue whatsoever. The issue, plain and simple, is the cost of maintaining that service.

The Town Council has a sworn responsibility to fiscally manage the Town to its betterment and is also legislated provincially to achieve and maintain certain levels of service and infrastructure, as well as being fiscally responsible. A well respected, impeccably credentialed, consultancy firm has stated, unequivocally, that the OPP will preserve and maintain the same level of policing and community service as the existing force, but at a substantially lower cost to the Town.

The OPP themselves have, in two separate public meetings, stated that they will do so and that there would be no extra costs in doing so. No enhancements are currently needed to reproduce the current levels of policing in Shelburne. Nevertheless, in her recent report to Council, CAO Denyse Morrissey demonstrated, that even with an enhancement, which means an additional charge over and above OPP basic policing guidelines, the Town would still save over \$5 million in the first ten years of the contract.

Other arguments have been put forward, which have also been reputed. For example, the loss of the currently recognized officers, to the town streets. This is simply wrong. The OPP will fast track the hiring of all qualified Shelburne police officers who choose to apply to OPP. They would have the right to remain in the Shelburne zone. Meaning, that only the uniforms would change, not the officers. However, even this is a red herring, because Shelburne's officers change just as regularly as any similar force. People change jobs and new people apply for jobs, everywhere.

The real issue here is the serious fiscal problems now facing the Town. Primarily, in existing infrastructure, these are non-negotiable and unavoidable. Major capital costs that will see the Town almost maximize its borrowing capacity to fund. The Town currently has a debt of \$5.2 plus million, which will take between seven and 17 years to pay off. Between 2020 and 2023, they have to cover an additional \$20.4 million in expenditures, without adding the cost of a new police facility.

Some are saying that proper debt and revenue management will cover these costs and leave money for a police facility. It will not. Shelburne is no longer a growing community, yes the existing developments will add new people, but there is no more land in Shelburne for major developments. Fiddle Park was the last and we all know what happened to that proposal. It will take several years for the new developments to be completed and occupied and for taxes and development charges to be collected. All of this potential income is provincially legislated to be spent according to set parameters.

Taxes belong to the Town for any purpose, however development charges are to be spent, principally, for the development on which they were charged, they are not general revenues for the Town to allocate anywhere.

Governments do not make money, they are not businesses. They take your money and spend it, hopefully responsibly, for the benefit of the taxpayers and they borrow the balance needed.. How much would you like your taxes and water bills to increase annually? How long are you willing to accommodate the smell of sewage in your homes and about town? Are you willing to drink arsenic levels, in your water, that are well above the legal levels? These are the issues the \$20.4 million are slated to deal with. What

is more important, the quality of life in Shelburne or the preservation of the existing police force?

In every scenario, the OPP, will likely cost the Town less than half the cost per building of the Shelburne Police Service, thus saving the Town over \$12 million in the next 13 years. Additionally, the OPP, are a better equipped and more versatile force, which, the Shelburne Police Service turns to for services already.

The Shelburne Police Service originated in 1879 and they have adequately served the Town since, but everything has a beginning and an end and in this modern and rapidly changing and challenging world, it is time to move on.

Town Council is obligated to best serve the interests of the residents and ratepayers of Shelburne. They bear the fiscal responsibility to balance their budgets while providing the citizens with the best quality of services, for the most reasonable cost. This is not ever an easy achievement. They must safeguard the Town's resources, while trying to keep taxes low and quality of life high, for the townspeople. Sometimes, as now, this requires sober second thought and hard decisions. In a perfect world, perhaps they could retain the SPS and build them a state of the art facility and afford the inevitable pay increases that will be requested and afford them the latest in equipment. However, the world is not perfect and governments are not all powerful and beneficent.

In the real world, sewage needs to be treated, water needs to be plentiful, pure and drinkable, roads need to be smooth and residents provided with amenities and services. Above all, the Town must be run both efficiently and fiscally responsibly. To do otherwise, is both morally and governmentally irresponsible.