

Shelburne Council stands behind local police force

Written By MIKE BAKER & JULIA LLOYD

The debate is over. A decision has been made. The Shelburne Police Service is here to stay.

On what was expected to be a tense night inside Council Chambers in Shelburne on Wednesday (July 10), the community's elected officials instead put on a show of solidarity, voting in unison, unanimously, to turn down a contract with the Ontario Provincial Police (OPP) and keep their faith in the 140-year-old Shelburne Police Service (SPS).

"This was a difficult decision for Council tonight, make no mistake about it," Mayor Wade Mills told media following the vote. "There were two main components to this that factored heavy in my decision. First was how do we maintain the level and quality of service the community has grown accustomed to receiving from SPS. But secondly, we had to figure out how we could do that in a fiscally responsible way."

Even with approximately 100 people in the room, each preparing to hear the final verdict, there was a calmness in the air that seemed to suggest the decision would not be a close one. As each member of Council took their time to explain their position prior to the vote, it became apparent SPS was in the clear. One by one, Mayor Mills, Deputy Mayor Steve Anderson and Councillors Kyle Fegan, Walter Benotto, Lindsay Wegener, Lynda Buffet and Shane Hall reached into their microphone, each saying only one word.

"Yes?" as in, yes, we would like to maintain the SPS.

"There are some things you just can't put a price tag on, and that is safety, family and the other is the Shelburne Police Service," said Deputy Mayor Anderson.

Last night's verdict is a little more than a year in the making. Once it became apparent, during the previous term of Council, that the local police service would, at the very least, require extensive renovations of the current station, located within Town Hall, Council made the decision to officially request a costing proposal from the OPP.

Simply put, the municipality knew its coffers were running dry and wanted to explore every opportunity before potentially sinking millions of dollars into either renovating the current facility, or building a brand new one. Over the past few months, it has been made abundantly clear that the Town's financial position has only deteriorated since that point, bringing even more scrutiny to last night's decision.

At a recent Town Council meeting, Shelburne CAO Denyse Morrissey indicated the municipality could, at most, scrape together \$3.8 million to pay for renovations of the existing station. It was determined months ago that, in spite of what municipal and local police officials may want, the Town simply did not have the borrowing capacity to build a brand new station.

"If this process has highlighted anything, it's the fact that we're not flush with money right now," said Mayor Mills. "We do have some very real restraints when it comes to our ability to borrow. One of the things we've looked at through this process is the renovation and expansion of the existing facility. That would include \$3 million of borrowed money, as well as \$800,000 drawn from development charges and reserves. Even to accomplish that, it will take a great amount of creativity within our Treasury department to make that work within our debt ceiling."

He added, "At least Council knows that's a very real upper limit in terms of our ability to find a solution. Knowing that is helpful. I'm hopeful now we'll be able to find a solution and tailor that to fit the budget."

A report provided to Council by independent consultant Jon Hambides last month suggested the Town would save a minimum of \$4 million by 2029 when compared with the most frugal SPS budget projections, if they transitioned to OPP, but could save as much as

\$12 million, when compared to more lavish SPS budget projections, which include suggested service improvements from Chief Kent Moore.

In what Mr. Hambides called "the most likely scenario", where SPS would complement service increases as requested by the Chief and borrow \$3 million to renovate the existing police facility, when compared with projected OPP costs, the municipality could have saved \$9.9 million by 2029.

But, almost echoing Deputy Mayor Anderson sentiments that this decision was about more than just money, Coun. Benotto indicated he would be loathe to lose what he deems to be a locally-sourced essential community service.

"We already lost our hospital, now, if we lose our police force, what makes us a small town?" Benotto asked.

With Council seemingly on the same page, they passed a second motion requesting that the Shelburne Police Services Board complete a comprehensive service delivery review of SPS prior to any future capital investment from the Town.

"That will reveal what special requirements there are for the police station moving forward and, hopefully, we can find ways to make more efficient use of technology to limit the square footage of the actual police station," Mayor Mills said.

Catching up with the Free Press following the decision, Police Chief Kent Moore admitted he was delighted Council came to the decision it did and that he was looking forward to putting the past 12 months behind him.

"This is a long time coming. I know it was a very, very tough decision for Council to make. Now, they've made their decision and we'll be continuing with SPS, providing police services to the town, and we're going to continue to do that in an excellent manner," Chief Moore stated.

When asked if he was at all worried heading into the vote, Chief Moore admitted he'd "be lying if (he) said there wasn't a bit of fear", but that now, he was looking forward to the future rather than dwelling on the past.

"I think we're going to do a staffing analysis to determine what we'll need for the future. We have two subdivisions currently being developed, one with well over 350 homes and the other with 240 homes. It's obviously going to effect staffing," Chief Moore said. "We're going to need to look at what we're going to require from a police station for the next 20 to 30 years because, hopefully, we're here to stay."