

Mayor Mills responds to various questions relating to COVID-19

Questions provided by PETER RICHARDSON

We sent out a list of 11 questions to Shelburne Mayor Wade Mills, covering a wide variety of topics, in the wake of the global COVID-19 pandemic. This is how he responded.

What is the current state of the pandemic in Shelburne?

As of Monday, March 20th we were advised by Wellington Dufferin Guelph Public Health that they had confirmed the first case of COVID-19 in Dufferin County. This did not entirely come as a surprise and it is more likely than not that there are other cases that have yet to be confirmed. The official confirmation of a local case should serve as a wake-up call to all of us. Our community is certainly not immune to this virus and we should certainly expect to see the number of confirmed cases increase in the coming days and weeks.

What options do townspeople and the Town have for further protections, and how will they be implemented, outside of other levels of government?

At this point the best advice that we are receiving in terms of protection is for people to practice social distancing to the extent possible, as well as general infection prevention. This means that people should be limiting their social interaction as much as possible, avoiding physical contact while they are out, regularly washing their hands with soap and hot water, and regularly cleaning and disinfecting frequently handled objects.

Are all Town essentials functional and protected? For example, water supply, wastewater removal garbage etc. What are our contingency plans for continued safety and supply, both for the workers and the public?

All of our critical services remain fully operational. Our facilities are closed to the public but we remain staffed and our police, fire, water, waste water, waste collection, and public works services are operating without interruption at this point in time. We have implemented a number of internal protocols to protect the health and well-being of our employees but these protocols have not yet been escalated to a point where services would be affected in any material way.

Are you working with upper tier governments and if so, how?

This is truly an "all hands on deck" effort and we have seen a tremendous degree of cooperation among all levels of government when it comes to the sharing of information and the coordination of efforts.

I had a call from our local MPP Sylvia Jones just this morning, who was checking in to make sure that we had the information and resources that we needed from the provincial government.

There has also been a lot of dialogue between local leaders within Dufferin County, which has been both helpful and encouraging. This virus does not recognize geographic or political boundaries so it is imperative that we view our strategies through both local and macro lenses.

How is the Council now functioning with meetings cancelled?

Our next regular Council meeting was scheduled for March 23 but we have suspended all Council and committee meetings until April 20.

I have been providing Council with regular updates and have scheduled an information briefing via teleconference to make sure that

we can continue to maintain an open dialogue and that everyone is kept fully abreast of the efforts we are undertaking. Should further meetings need to be cancelled, we will review the options available to us and look to the Province for direction as to best to proceed.

How are day-to-day operations being managed currently?

While Council provides the policy direction in the municipality, day-to-day operations are generally managed by our staff team anyways. This week we have begun holding daily briefings which include myself and a number of senior staff members and this has allowed us to ensure that decisions are being made strategically and that each department is fully engaged.

Does the Town have an Emergency Measures type by-law and what does it cover and authorize.

We do have a Municipal Emergency Plan as well as an Emergency Control Group which consists of myself, members of senior staff as well as our chiefs of police and fire. This group met Monday morning for a full briefing and planning session and we will continue to meet on a regular basis going forward.

I have not made a declaration of emergency at the local level but that option remains available should it become necessary. This would provide for the delegation of certain decision-making authorities to myself and the COA as well as mechanisms to make other resources more readily available.

Are there now or will there be any assessment and or testing facilities set up in Shelburne?

We do not currently have any assessment or testing facilities within the Town of Shelburne proper, but Headwaters Healthcare Centre has just mobilized such a facility at their location.

Does the Town have any medical officer they can turn to, or do we rely on the province?

Locally, we are under the jurisdiction of Wellington Dufferin Guelph Public Health but we are also relying on information and advice from health authorities at the provincial and federal levels. As I said before, this is a borderless virus and as such the information sharing and strategies being employed must also be borderless.

What message do you have for a number of residents who believe this is still all a media/social media created panic?

I understand that many people are still confused about the threat that we are facing as a result of the spread of COVID-19. There is so much information flowing from a number of sources and unfortunately, much of that information is dubious at best, and flat out wrong at worst.

As a municipality, we are being guided by science in this effort and I would encourage residents to do the same.

We can take lessons from other countries who have been hit hard by this virus much earlier than us. Many people in Italy for example did not initially see this as being a major threat or something that required any serious response but time has proven otherwise.

We have seen that this virus spreads very quickly and exponentially once it takes hold. While it's true that many healthy people who contract the virus may not experience any severe symptoms, they may easily transmit the virus to someone who is highly vulnerable (parents, grandparents, neighbours).

Let me be clear, this is very likely the most serious public health crisis of our time. We need to take this seriously and we have to try our best to limit and slow the spread of the virus so that our healthcare system has a fighting chance to keep up and treat those who will require treatment. This is not a time to play the odds.

As we progress through this pandemic and assuming that our social distancing succeeds in slowing the spread, what do you say to the townsfolk?

This virus is demonstrating perhaps more than ever before just how interdependent we are. Our own health, and that of our families, depends almost as much upon the actions and decisions of others within our community as it does upon our own.

Individually, we can do everything right but if one member of our community chooses to act irresponsibly or decides to disregard the overwhelming science, they could trigger an undoing of all of the positive efforts being made to contain and slow the spread of COVID-19. Accordingly, I am asking all residents to step up and take the proper precautions, make the responsible choices, and do their part to aid in this effort ? if not for themselves, then for the rest of the community.

Challenges like this can often bring out the best and worst in people. I am calling on the better angels of our nature to show up and shine now when needed most. We are blessed in this town to be full of caring and compassionate people and we are without doubt a strong and resilient community.

Sure, we will face some enormous tests in the coming weeks, and perhaps even months, but I know that we can weather this storm if we are willing to come together and lay self-interest aside for a short while. Times like this require us to think bigger than ourselves and to act more selflessly and courageously than usual.

We will eventually see a return to normalcy, but the actions we are willing to take collectively now will determine how quickly and fully that return is realized. I am confident that Shelburne will meet this test of our time and ultimately emerge even stronger and more unified than before.