

Council explains their police vote

Written By PAULA BROWN

Shelburne Town Council voted unanimously for the disbandment of Shelburne Police Service (SPS) in a special council meeting on July 15. Each council member took a moment to speak before giving their vote of 'yes'. This is a completed transcription of their comments.

Mayor Wade Mills

To provide some context as to where we are tonight I do think it is helpful to go back to the beginning.

During the last term, the last council received a formal report known as the Walter Fetty report from the then Shelburne Police Services Board which indicated that the existing Shelburne Police Service facility was no longer serving the needs of the service. Three options were outlined in that report and those included the construction of a new building, the renovation and expansion of the existing facility or the purchase of an existing building that would then in turn require retrofitting to suit it to the police service's needs. During those discussion the last council decided that it was the prudent thing to pursue an OPP costing as a way of surveying an additional option outside of the major capital expenditure involved in providing a new police facility. At the time Mayor Bennington said quite accurately that 'we don't have a police problem in the town of Shelburne but we do have a police facility problem'.

This current council was then elected and took office part way through that first OPP costing process. In the end, this council devised a plan that affectively solved the facility problems and on that basis this council voted unanimously last July to keep our municipal police service. This accommodation plan that was considered last year called for the renovation and expansion of the current facility at a cost of approximately 3.9 million dollars; 3 million of which would have been raised through borrowing. Was this a perfect plan? No, it certainly wasn't and at the time we heard time and again that the plan was going to push the town to its financial limits.

Still, this council resolved to try and make that work and we voted as we did to keep our Shelburne Police Service on that basis.

Fast forward then from July 2019 to December 2019 and the town of Orangeville's council voted to transition to the OPP.

All of a sudden the game changed. This decision by the Orangeville council had a ripple effect on us and it meant higher cost for dispatch and supervision going forward as well as the removal of any possible future partnership options that would have improved or strengthened the longer term sustainability of the Shelburne Police Service. Faced with this new reality, this council voted unanimously in January of 2020 to obtain a second OPP costing. That costing is now in and the analysis has been completed. The staff report which we received tonight that contains that analysis has been in the public realm since last Friday and we've all had an opportunity to carefully review it and we've had an opportunity to ask questions this evening. The analysis and the facts underlining that analysis paint a very clear picture which is unfortunately this.

Our ability to continue with a municipal police force is just no longer financially sustainable. What we still do not have a policing problem in the town of Shelburne our problems now have grown to include not only the facility but also dispatch, supervision and most importantly from my perspective the long term financial sustainability of the service itself.

They say that misery likes company and whether or not that's true it's important to note that we are not alone in this struggle. Small municipal police services around the province are facing similar issues and municipal councils are being left with a difficult decisions of transitioning to the OPP or considering amalgamations or contracts for service with other larger neighbouring services. Unfortunately, we in the town of Shelburne no longer have any of those options available to us as there are no other municipal services in close proximity.

So in the final analysis it comes down to this for me. Municipal policing in the Town of Shelburne is just simply no longer financial sustainable and we are without any additional partnership options to consider. Therefore a transition to the OPP is inevitable either now or in the very near future. If we lack the courage to make the difficult and responsible decision that is require now than what we are doing is effectively delaying the inevitable and we are allowing the Shelburne Police Service an institution with over 100 years of proud service to suffer a slow and painful demise. I'm not prepared to allow that to happen. The institution itself deserves better than this and more importantly our officers deserve better than this.

To those who are still concerned to the level of service that we can expect for the OPP I would remind you of the survey results that we just saw tonight from our own Shelburne officers. In a number of critical service areas our own officers are telling us that we can expect to see no change or perhaps even a positive impact as a result of an eventual transition to the OPP. I know that many people are fearful of change but when it comes to this one I for myself am going to trust the judgement and options of our own officers instead of those providing emotional commentary on social media.

Finally in closing I do want to speak directly to the member of Shelburne police service. As your Mayor I will be forever grateful for the service that you have provided to our community. Your dedication to serving our community for decades is a true testament to the level of commitment that you have both individually and collectively. The Dufferin OPP detachment will be lucky to have you join their forces and I look forward to seeing you continue to serve our community all be it in different uniforms. My pledge to each of you is this, and that is to make sure that this professional transition for each of you is as smooth as possible. I know that you and your families have endured a stressful couple of years and I have no intentions of making that any more difficult. We've heard your concerns and we understand that you do not want this inevitable transition to be put off or prolonged any further. That is why I put forth the motion that I have tonight and I do hope that the rest of council will support it.

Deputy Mayor Steve Anderson

For those who are viewing live and for those who are going to be watching this video subsequently, I think it is important to make very clear that none of us anticipated being here tonight making this decision. When we made the decision to keep the Shelburne police quite some time ago, we made that decision after listening to community, looking at our finances and understanding the value that the Shelburne police bring to our community.

We've heard from the CAO on a number of occasions that Council was provided with new and unexpected costs, and I think that is very important to point out, that has made the keeping of Shelburne Police no longer financially feasible. At the end of the day we are elected to make decisions that are financially prudent for our community, and to protect and respect taxpayer's dollars. I think the decision we are making tonight will do just that.

Without question each and every one of us value the services SPS has brought to community, and I agree that it's time to rip of the band aid and do what we need to do today.

Coun. Walter Benotto

That's quite the speech, it's going to be hard to follow the mayor's speeches. On my part, I'm going to agree with a lot of what mayor said. I've been on Council quite a while. I can go back in history and remember as part of Council's commitment, at one point we did go to Orangeville and try to amalgamate with them. It was denied at that point by the Orangeville Council to move forward with amalgamation which is unfortunate because if we had done that back then, we would still be able to have a Shelburne police force now, and that's going back almost 20 years.

I agree with the mayor, we cannot continue the way we are right now. Some point down in the future, some council somewhere will decide to go to OPP seeing the cost to the taxpayers. The cost is becoming unbearable to the taxpayers, it's going to continue to rise at higher rate, now it's double possibly higher than that in future. Even with the current building proposal down the road, once again it's not going to meet the needs of any police and we're going to have to look at something else.

It's unrealistic. I've had long conversations with our Chief and he has told me in the past, this is going back almost two terms ago, that small police forces are something that is eventually going to be eliminated in the province. That's the way the province is going. They won't come out and do it straight out, they don't want to have small police forces, doing it through other means making it more difficult for smaller police to continue to operate.

I personally would love to keep the Shelburne Police Force. They are something I would have fought for tooth and nail but I've come to realization it's just not something that can continue, it's not something I can continue to fight for. It's unfortunate. I think they're fantastic, they always do a fantastic job. Myself like everyone else we're always scared of change, always scared of what the future will bring.

As the survey has said, we're going to see same faces in the town, the majority of them, and they're going to continue to serve us. Even after the three year time frame I'm pretty sure a lot of those officers, they're from small town, they've lived here, they grew up here and I don't believe they have huge intentions to move on and moving away. They're going to continue to serve. Even if they do they will teach the new officers that come into town and help them to transition to be a part of the town. We've had officers change over the years, I've gone through three police Chiefs in my time, just in my term on council along with a lot of changes of officer's faces. When I started out to where I am now, I've seen changes in the officers. New officers come in, they become part of the community and this will continue with OPP.

So I'm prepared to go forward and that's why I've seconded the motion. While I hate losing Shelburne Police, I think and I agree with the mayor let's just do what they said. Rip the band aid off and let them go out with dignity as a proud force. I'd like to thank each individual officer at the police force for all service they have had for us.

Coun. Lynda Buffet

The decision tonight that I came to was a very difficult one, because I was hoping tonight that I would hear from other members of Council that they wanted to support continuation with the police service. I realize after listening to some of the comments from the current police force that they would be happier moving on and transitioning to OPP. Which to me was very disappointing to hear.

I did want to point out some of the other financial aspects of this change, just to bring to everyone's attention it is not just a straightforward, black and white issue. Basically, when we look at the comparison for costing for OPP and the costing for Shelburne Police, we start off with being in a deficit of \$5.4 million, and it takes us five years to break even. Then at that point, we're look at costing that's been provided to us, that can't be guaranteed on the actual costing to have OPP provide that service. My concern is that the fact that, right now, having gone through COVID-19 pandemic, the provincial government, like every other government, is going to have significant debt. Can they guarantee these costings that we have put in place in front of us right now can be that? They couldn't guarantee it last year, they can't guarantee it this year and certainly that's going to have an impact on us

As far as the costing Carey put together on Friday, it pointed to fact that costing would be about \$1,067 per household on average, which works out to \$15.44 per month to keep the Shelburne Police. Adding to that, is also worthwhile thinking about the fact that we've more tax revenue coming in from growth we have commercially, industrially and residentially, so that will help to offset that.

Having said all of that, and looking at all those figures, it appears to me that it doesn't matter what we look at, the decision has already been made to transition to OPP. I still would like to support the Shelburne Police, but I will go along with whatever the majority of Council decides.

Coun. Kyle Fegan

None of us at this table were expecting to be here so soon after the last decision was made. The decision for Orangeville certainly did launched us into this position and it is an unfortunate one. We all fought very hard last time to keep our police service, and it's still a position that if it was financially feasible, I certainly would fight tooth or nail for as well.

It's been mentioned before and worth noting again, it's been said we don't have a policing issue. We never have in my experience within Shelburne, and I don't foresee that being an issue going forward either.

It is with a heavy heart unfortunately that looking at all details, all the facts, looking at every possible avenue, I just don't see a financially responsible way that this force will be sustainable going forward even in the near future.

As we saw from the survey, it would be very unfair of us and would be a very big disservice to the men and women in uniform who have served us so well for, for so long to delay this any further and drag them through the mud any more. They're tired of the yoyo syndrome, and it's not fair to keep doing this to them. That's where my position is with a heavy heart unfortunately but that's why I'm going to have to support this.

Coun. Shane Hall

I'm also very disappointed that we're even here tonight. Last year I truly felt we had this issue dealt with as at that point it was an accommodation issue. At that point we further burdened our residents with this.

Tonight is no longer about dealing with an accommodation issue, it's really about dealing with the fallout from undisclosed documents as well as agreements and those related impacts. Obviously from the Chiefs own concerns, we have to take action. And that action obviously leads us to where we are tonight.

I do have however struggle with the lack of transparency when it was needed most, and that of course was when we started this process and final made our initial decisions back last summer. Based on the facts laid before me tonight, I can financially no longer support the burden that it places upon our residents and as such I will be supporting the move to the OPP.

Coun. Lindsey Wegener

I'd like to begin by thanking town staff for once again devoting time to provide us with information, as that's not an easy task and the OPP for also providing a presentation again.

This decision has not been a welcomed or easy one for myself or any of us. We have once again found ourselves in the position of deciding the future of Shelburne's policing service. With the recent decision of Orangeville's policing direction, and new information regarding the operation of SPS and the significant costs involved in meeting those important requirements for optimal and proper operation, I must consider the financial impact on the town.

As we have stated, this is not a result of lack of service from the SPS. The officers on our force have continued to deliver exceptional service and I thank them greatly for that.

As once again I have devoted countless hours to this decision, the weight of taking into account approximately 10,000 people's safety and financial capabilities is heavy on my soul. Why is this? Because I live here too, and my decision affects us all. I believe our officers deserve better than the rollercoaster of uncertainty they have been given.