

Dufferin OPP to remain focused on keeping the peace during bi-weekly 'freedom' protests]

Written By PAULA BROWN

LOCAL JOURNALISM INITIATIVE REPORTER

Shelburne residents should not expect the Dufferin OPP to take a 'heavy hand' in stopping the bi-weekly downtown protests, as the local detachment says their job is to 'keep the peace.'

During their meeting on Monday (March 27), Shelburne council received a presentation from the OPP addressing concerns regarding the bi-weekly 'freedom' protests occurring in town. The meeting comes after community members raised questions about what the OPP is doing about the protests and if there is a possibility of providing a greater uniformed officer presence.

Members of the OPP and the OPP Dufferin detachment said on Monday that their focus during the demonstrations has been maintaining the peace and safety of residents and protestors.

'We have to keep in mind the rights of the charter. People do have the right to peacefully demonstrate and they also have the right to free speech,' said OPP acting Staff Sgt. Mike Acton. 'We have to allow people their rights to demonstrate within the safety of the community.'

Local residents have raised questions about a change of approach, as the protests have continued on a bi-weekly basis for more than a year.

'Our plan isn't changing. We're going to stay, we're going to protect the peace and rights of all sides, and we're there to investigate should an event take place. But, to date it's been peaceful,' said Dufferin OPP Commander, Insp. Terry Ward.

Addressing the possibility of having uniformed officers present at the demonstration, the OPP said it could potentially incite demonstrators.

'It's been my experience that demonstrators are more open and cooperative with suggestions and asks when they're not having a uniform member tell them to do so,' said Acton.

Mayor Wade Mills raised concerns that the community is reaching a 'critical boiling point' between residents and protesters.

'I think there's a real potential that some frustrated members of the public, in feeling as though action isn't being taken or enough action taken, may decide at some point in time that enough is enough, and do something on their own,' said Mills. 'There is a frustration that is palpable, and my concern is that if something isn't done to stem the tide of this then we're going to reach that point, and we're going to be confronting a much larger issue than we have seen to date.'

Dufferin OPP Const. Jennifer Roach has provided police presence at the bi-weekly protests and said she has not had to take action yet.

'I don't believe that the number of police are going to change anything,' said Roach.

The Dufferin OPP also added that of the 26 protests, they've received around four calls for service.

The local police detachment is encouraging residents that experience issues with the demonstration to contact the police.

'If someone has an issue going on, especially with the demonstration, call the police and we will respond, we'll look at it, and see if

there are grounds to lay charges there,? said Ward.

The OPP's presentation can be watched on the Town of Shelburne's YouTube channel.