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A big decision for Shelburne Council

Our Readers Write

The Shelburne Police Service is at Risk of being Disbanded.

It is crunch time. The report is in. Well, it is called a report. It was very painful to hear the answers to the questions from Council. A report with charts that could not even be read and answers that did not clear up any concerns. No questions were allowed from the Public.

Shelburne Council deliberated on whether to replace the Shelburne Police Service with the OPP. According to Pomax Inc., the external Consultant hired to assess the Town's options, the ?the same quality and level of policing service currently experienced by the Town of Shelburne will continue if the town decides to contract with the OPP, but at a much lower cost.? Much of this conclusion was opinion, not fact.

Councillors are in a tough position, to make a decision on whether to go with the OPP, the driving fact is that The Shelburne Police have outgrown their current office and the costs of renovating or expanding the existing facility are significant. The information of investing in a larger police station means that Council will have fewer resources to devote to other worthwhile projects. Within this context, it can be tempting to simply cut costs and choose the OPP. The report if looked into is not providing service vs service costing. The OPP model is for base service only. Many services will be added costs per service.

But selecting the cheaper option rarely ends well when it applies to public goods, especially policing.

It is unlikely that the OPP would provide the same quality services. Why? Because quality is about more than responding to calls. The Shelburne Police have become synonymous with our community's small-town charm. Our Shelburne Police officers work at our buck and does, lead our parades, interact with Students and deliver the DARE programs that keep our kids off drugs. They organize charity events and have represented our town on the international stage at Special Olympics events. Local interacation with our local citizens, is a priceless asset to our town.

Moreover, the Shelburne Police offer residents a different kind of relationship with law enforcement ? one based in trust and openness, community-spirit and engagement. In an era when others have become more suspicious of police, Shelburne residents have shown overwhelming support for the Shelburne Police Services: they have erected yellow yard and window signs and have signed petitions in solidarity with the Shelburne Police. This relationship ? between police and community ? should be celebrated and acknowledged.

Despite assurances to the contrary, it is not a certainty that the OPP would be the more cost-effective option in practice. What will the extra charges be? No clear answers from the OPP or the consultant. Future costs are not guaranteed. They can set their pricing to where they want, as there will only be a set three year contract to be re-evaluated at that time. At that time there will be fees for services and an adjustment made, which in the models supplied don't take in consideration.

Disbanding our police will have huge costs and time and effort put in by the Shelburne administration, these costs have not been discussed. The true costs of severances, and the impact of broken contracts with existing staff, the impact on moral for the town, the reorganization of the building and refitting of the existing office space to other uses, all issues that need to be thoroughly investigated.

This Town Council has been thrust into this huge decision, by the lack of forsight of previous councils to plan and save for capital investments. In the wake of all of this, when in doubt, look after your own. Regroup and find ways to maintain. Major changes are still coming to our small town. We need our Police Services. Too much change to fast. Keep our constant which is our Security, Our Shelburne Police Service.

Residents should ask themselves what kind of community they want to live in. Shelburne has managed to retain its small-town charm despite growing faster than almost any other small municipality in Canada. It would be a shame to lose a central piece of that charm should Council disband its police service based on misguided cost considerations and a questionable report.

Shelburne Council did discuss this item at Monday June 24 Council meeting, but when asked Mayor Mills declined having any public input. This important matter was very late on the agenda and was not introduced until 10 pm. The discussion on a serious budget item and impact to the town, is not just Councils matter it is all of ours. The issue of the Town being is a tight financial situation is not the fault of the Police Services, and they should not be the casualty.

My concern is that the pressures on Council in the short time and the lack of consideration of what the citizens actually want, will lead to a irreversible decision. Deciding to go to the OPP may put us onto a path of reaching out for other services as will, like the Fire Dept. The next will likely be regionalization of our municipal government. Is this, what Shelburne is all about?

Marg McCarthy

Shelburne resident