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Time, technology let County continue review despite pandemic restrictions

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Consultants and Dufferin County staff have adapted to inconveniences wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic toward completing a Municipal Comprehensive Review started in March.

The MCR process involves the county and its municipalities launching headlong into background research, public consultation, and policy formulation toward an updated Official Plan. The process started with a March 3 open house in Mono.

Then the COVID-19 pandemic hit and thwarted required public consultations.

Darrell Keenie, the county's director of Planning, Economic Development and Culture updated county council about work done since the review began March 3 with a public open house meeting. His report was prepared for council's May 14 meeting.

He outlined next steps in the MCR process and ways in which WSP, consultants hired by the county, and Dufferin staff have adapted to overcome pandemic restrictions.

The MCR project is a step toward updating the county's Official Plan. Planning staff have been meeting regularly about the MCR via video conference during pandemic restrictions. Consultants await information from the provincial government to complete the growth management component of the MCR.

The pandemic has caused a delay in getting required feedback from Queen's Park.

?Notwithstanding the anticipated delay of growth management data, the county is moving forward on all other MCR components,? said Mr. Keenie in his report.

That includes establishing a stakeholder advisory group and public engagement activities via a number of online platforms including Join-In Dufferin and tele/video conferences.

?The COVID-19 pandemic continues to impact the planning process as governments respond with restrictions on public gatherings and decision-makers adapt to electronic remote meetings,? says the report.

?Despite these necessary changes, WSP has adapted and remains fully operational and committed to advancing our work with Dufferin County.?

In a memo to the county, the consultants say WSP staff are working on the review from their respective homes. Their workplan has been adapted to accommodate public engagement while allowing for physical distancing.

?We will work with the county to develop alternative methods for conducting outreach such as email newsletters to communicate major project updates,? according to the WSP memo.

Legislation requires that decisions on Official Plans and amendments be preceded by a special meeting of council and at least one public open house and public meeting. That requirement has not been amended by emergency regulations due to the pandemic.

The Mono open house March 3, 2020 and a special county council meeting March 12 satisfy two of those requirements.

But the pre-pandemic WSP workplan called for additional public engagement events.

?Restrictions on public gatherings due to the pandemic make it impossible to host a traditional open house or public meeting,? said the consultants.

?There are opportunities to use technology to invite the public to participate in open video conferencing events online.?

Many rural Dufferin residents are excluded from high-speed internet and that makes online open house consultations to be fairly undertaken.

?Thankfully, the MCR is still fairly early in its workplan and it is anticipated that restrictions will likely be relaxed or lifted before work for Phase 1 has been completed,? the consultants wrote in their memo to council.