

South Algonquin discusses social media strategy



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By Mike Riley

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South Algonquin Township held their latest Economic Development Committee meeting on Jan. 20 and one of the items on the agenda was to have a more extensive discussion about Councillor Bongo Bongo's proposal to enact a comprehensive social media engagement strategy for the township.

This strategy would include real time comments on the township's YouTube channel, having the new economic development intern assume the lion's share of the municipality's social media duties, at some point in the future expanding into using Twitter and Instagram and using software like Hootsuite for a social media posting schedule to minimize the staff time and resources spent on this endeavor. After Bongo's presentation and some questions and discussion on the issue, the committee decided to defer any further comments and decisions on the issue until they had time to fully reread and examine Bongo's presentation.

Bongo brought up the prospect of the township adopting a more fulsome social media engagement strategy at the Jan. 13 council meeting in an official notice of motion. While there had been some discourse about it then, it had been deferred to this Economic Development committee meeting for a more extensive discussion.

"The idea for this social media engagement strategy arose from the wayfinding maps, and engaging with the public. We had a great meeting in May with council and the designers about the maps and then I approached the businesses. I realized at that moment that they should have been engaged with before that council meeting, in the springtime as opposed to the fall and wintertime," he says.

Bongo went on to say that a more comprehensive township social media strategy would allow council to engage with the public so that discussions on issues happen more efficiently. If such a plan had been in place, they could have gotten public feedback sooner and come up with the map drafts more efficiently.

While he agrees that the incoming economic development intern should get the business retention plan going and also pursue several grants, he would also like to see that person spend up to 50 per cent of their time on social media and assume the role of the township's social media manager.

"Like our other infrastructure, digital infrastructure is also an asset and we need to keep it up to date and fresh. Our YouTube channel for the council meetings is one of the better ones out there for municipal government. For me as a councillor, this is very exciting and I really want to build on this momentum and to continue to increase our engagement with the public," he says.

Bongo says that the township has a new brand and they should make a statement on the internet. He says that he's been a councillor

for just over two years and the number one thing residents come to him about is having better communication with the township.

?We have a great Facebook page, but in 2021 residents are expecting even more social media interaction and posting,? he says.

He also emphasized that this new social media strategy was not about increasing views, or tourism or marketing. It was about transparency.

?I think a modern government like ours in 2021 needs to show their transparency by being active on social media. If residents see more social media posts courtesy of a social media manager, it will build more trust with the public,? he says.

Bongo put forth having real time comments allowed during the YouTube airing of the council meetings.

?I think it's refreshing that constituents can watch on YouTube video and if any questions or comments pop into their mind they just can type it into the comment box,? he says.

Holly Hayes, the clerk and treasurer, piped in at that point and said that, to her knowledge, comments had always been allowed. If they hadn't been at any given time, she did not know why.

?I did not restrict comments ever, for the record,? she says.

Bongo thanked her for clearing that up, and everyone was just glad that the ability to comment in real time was working again at the present time.

In addition to having the economic development intern being the social media manager, Bongo would also like to see that person sit in on council meetings, and come up with topics to post on social media. He would also like to see a posting schedule put into place.

In regard to people who worry about over posting, Bongo replied that it is increasingly important for municipalities to control their online social media narrative, a fact he learned from a lecture on that subject at the 2020 ROMA conference.

?People are going to be having conversations about local politics, positive or negative, whether we're involved or not. In 2021, because we're in this modern digital age, I think it's really important for use to get involved and start conversations online because we want to make sure we're getting the correct information out and we also want to have some influence over the tone. As a township, we want to set a respectful and constructive discussion tone on social media and one of the ways to do that is by a regular posting routine,? he says.

Bongo would like to see the township continue on with its Facebook page and YouTube channel, and if all continues to go well, add on Twitter and an Instagram page later on.

In response to other councillors and staff concerns that this social media strategy would take up too much staff time and resources, Bongo mentioned Hootsuite, which allows users to come up with a posting schedule and preplan items to be posted online to social media accounts automatically.

Bongo also referenced a 2012 municipal report from East Gwillimbury that brought up a lot of these ideas, and said he thought it was applicable to today and to South Algonquin Township.

?I think we should use social media to humanize our organization. As a councillor, I'll be more confident making decisions when I have that interaction with the public, especially that the public can see these public conversations as well,? he says.

Mayor Jane Dumas thanked Bongo for a well thought out presentation, and asked him to send the full report to her and the other councillors for them to have a closer look before they commented any further on his presentation. Bongo agreed to do so, and said

the full presentation would be up on his Facebook page as well.

In closing, Bongo conceded to the committee that what he was proposing was a bold idea, and at present their social media was pretty good.

?However, there are steps we can take to improve it even further, and to make it more of a 2021 style of social media. After all, it's the COVID-19 era,? he says. ?For us to be connected with our constituency, a dynamic social media strategy is paramount.?