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South Algonquin council passes new bylaws to bring in new physicians

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By Mike Riley

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

South Algonquin Township council had their council meeting on Feb. 3 and passed three bylaws to bring some new doctors into their community. As part of the Joint Municipal Physician Recruitment and Retention Committee, South Algonquin welcomes Dr. Daniel Michael Ostapowicz and Dr. Teresa Ann Ostapowicz to the community, as well as medical student/physician Dr. Erin Murray, who will begin practicing medicine after she passes her medical exams in mid-2021. All the doctors will be practicing medicine at the Madawaska Valley Family Health Organization, as well as caring for residents at Valley Manor Long Term Care Facility and working at the St. Francis Memorial Hospital.

The Joint Municipal Physician Recruitment and Retention Program is composed of municipal and community representatives from the municipalities of Brudenell Lyndoch and Raglan, Killaloe, Hagarty and Richards, Madawaska Valley, North Algona Wilberforce, South Algonquin, Madawaska Valley Family Health Organization, the Valley Manor Long Term Care Home and St. Francis Memorial Hospital. The committee, chaired by Mayor Jane Dumas, supports recruits that are looking for a varied rural health care experience and who make a return of service commitment. They also provide recruits financial support for on-site visits and a financial incentive to assist in education, relocating and setting up a rural practice. While the objective of the committee through the years was to recruit primary care physicians to rural areas like South Algonquin, this responsibility will soon be undertaken by the Ontario Health Teams, or family health teams and the JMPRRC stopped accepting funding after the end of 2020. South Algonquin made its last payment to the JMPRRC last year in the amount of $14,000. The JMPRRC will end its tenure after December 2021.

At the Feb. 3 council meeting, South Algonquin council passed bylaws to approve the hiring of three new physicians; Dr. Daniel Michael Ostapowicz, Dr. Teresa Ann Ostapowicz and medical student/physician Dr. Erin Murray by the JMPRRC.

The new physicians, Dr. Daniel Ostapowicz and Dr. Teresa Ann Ostapowicz, are taking over the practice of Dr. Alex Atfield. According to a press release issued by the JMPRR on Feb. 4, the Ostapowiczs have family connections to the Barry's Bay region over many years, and formed a part of their decision to practice medicine in the area.

Dr. Erin Murray, currently studying at the University of Ottawa's Faculty of Medicine, obtained hands-on clinical experience working at St. Francis Memorial Hospital and the Family Health Organization under the direction of Dr. Jason Malinowski. According to the JMPRR press release, the opportunity to practice medicine in a rural setting with diverse care options made Madawaska Valley the right choice for Dr. Murray and her professional goals.

After Dumas announced the bylaws, she opened up the floor to questions and discussion. Councillor Joe Florent and Councillor Richard Shalla had a question about the JMPRRC and how they had heard it was being disbanded in 2021 and whether that was still the case.

Dumas said that the committee was still being dissolved, but that they wanted to get this good news about the new physician hires out there first.

?We'll keep every one of our communities apprised of the process [of disbanding the committee] as we go through it, and we can discuss that at later meetings,? she says.

Councillor Joe Vermaire had a question for Dumas about where the money comes from to provide incentive to these physicians to

work in the area. Dumas replied that it was municipal taxpayers' money that had been paid into the fund allotted for the purpose of bringing doctors into the area to practice since the JMPRR was first established back in 1999.

Dumas emphasized that the role of a rural physician is quite different than that of an urban doctor. In the urban setting, the doctor usually works in an office and at the end of the day can close the door and go home. While in a rural setting, in addition to his/her office duties, they also are required to cover the emergency department and look after in patients at St. Francis Memorial Hospital, look after patients at Valley Manor Long Term Care Home and to be on various hospital committees.

?It takes a special kind of person who wants to do all those jobs. We've been fortunate but it does make it harder to attract individuals and that is where the incentives come in,? she says.

Overall, the physicians are paid $150,000 over the course of four years for living expenses, and shall practice medicine in the area for no fewer than four years. In the case of Dr. Daniel Ostapowicz and Dr. Teresa Ann Ostapowicz, they are splitting that $150,000 incentive, so each of them will get $75,000 each, according to Dumas. So, upon signing this agreement, the Drs. Ostapowicz received $60,000, they'll receive another $30,000 on Jan. 15, 2022, Jan. 15, 2023 and Jan. 15, 2024. Jan. 15, 2025 marks the end of their term of service.

In the case of medical student/physician Dr. Erin Murray, the municipalities pay her $150,000 toward her tuition, books and living expenses as follows; $50,000 upon signing of the agreement, $75,000 payable on Jan. 15, 2022 and another $25,000 payable on Jan. 15, 2023. The agreement stipulates that within three months of Dr. Murray completing her studies, she will practice family medicine in the area for no fewer than five years. The end of her term of service is Jan. 15, 2026.

The bylaws, numbered 21-628, 21-629 and 21-630, were read three times, and were voted on and passed by council unanimously. Dumas commented on their passage after the meeting.

?The passing of the three bylaws, one for each physician, represents the culmination of all the efforts and actions of the Joint Municipal Physician Recruitment and Retention Committee in the recruitment process. A bylaw executes the execution of the medical services agreement between the corporation of each municipality and the physician named in the bylaw. It is a day of celebration for local health care provision when each of the five municipalities passed their bylaw. It is symbolic of their vision and cooperation in working together for their communities.?