

Hastings Highlands investigating OMB costs



Members of Hastings Highlands council discuss a motion for staff to report what the municipality's November Ontario Municipal Board hearing cost ratepayers Feb. 7. / SARAH SOBANSKI Staff

By Sarah Sobanski

Hastings Highlands ratepayers will soon know what the municipality's Ontario Municipal Board hearing cost them.

Hastings Highlands Councillor Tracy Hagar motioned for staff to prepare a report "indicat[ing] totals of what the appeal cost the municipality, including staff time" from its OMB hearing last November.

"I have had ratepayers wanting to know what this whole OMB hearing process cost the ratepayers of our municipality, therefore I am asking staff to come up with an amount dollar wise," said Hagar.

The hearing was held after former Hastings Highlands mayor Brent Dalglish appealed council's decision to vote at-large instead of ward by ward for this year's election. The OMB sided with the municipality.

Municipal CAO Pat Pilgrim said during discussion that it would be hard to quantify staff hours in the report.

"The hard costs we are aware of," said Pilgrim. "In terms of staff costs any figure we could give you would be purely speculative. I know many days I spent a lot of hours but how much that cost is ? I wouldn't even hazard a guess."

"I think it's important that people know you spent a lot of hours on it. Also, I'm sure [deputy clerk] Suzanne [Huschilt] spent a lot of hours as well as [treasurer and deputy CAO] David [Stewart] as well on this," said Hagar. "Even just knowing that it's a lot of hours away from other daily needs of the municipality is very important for people to know."

Councillor Hald Robinson agreed that people deserved to know the cost.

"What's the use of us sitting around this council table if we're going to be turned down at every decision. We're in here to do the work of the ratepayers and to manage the affairs of the municipality so I think it's no more than right that the people know what this appeal process has actually cost the municipality."

Councillor Nancy Matheson noted it was within the rights of any ratepayer or agency to appeal a decision of council. She said that the report would shed a new light on that right and suggested it would make those who exercise it take it seriously.

Deputy Mayor Gregg Roberts said the municipality was responsible for costing ratepayers money as it made the decision to vote

at-large ? not Dagleish or those who brought Hastings Highlands's voter parity issues to council with a petition in December 2016.

?The only issue I have is of the inference of the way it's come forward here with the case name,? said Roberts. The case name was made by the OMB and includes the appellant's name.

?It started way prior to that with the decision being made by us... The name shouldn't be in here. It's an OMB hearing that is brought upon the municipality that we are ultimately the ones that ended [up] making a decision [bringing] the OMB. We cost the money as opposed to Dagleish costing the money or whomever brought it forward costing the money. Ultimately it's everybody's responsibility, I just want to make that clear.?

The motion passed at the Feb. 7 meeting. The report will be brought back Feb. 21.