

Council to receive first draft of exotic animal bylaw on June 16

By Nate Smelle

Since big cat owners Mark and Tammy Drysdale's plans to operate a roadside zoo became public last November, opposition to their proposed 'safari experience' business has been growing. Out of concern for public health and safety, and the welfare of the animals the Drysdales intend to use as the main attraction at their zoo, a coalition of local residents and animal advocates from across the province have been pressing Hastings Highlands council to take control of the situation by passing an exotic animal bylaw.

Although council has had access to the exotic animal bylaw template they requested from Hastings County since Jan. 20, Hastings Highlands has struggled to address the issue. During this time period, local municipalities such as Limerick, Highlands East, and Faraday have all been able to enact bylaws that protect their residents and exotic animals. It was also recently reported by the CBC that another exotic animal owner has capitalized on the municipality's lack of regulations and purchased property in Hastings Highlands. At the same time, the Drysdales have also increased the number of big cats they own by allowing their lions to breed.

While the health of the Drysdales' three cubs is currently unknown, a Facebook post from Mark Drysdale approximately a day after their birth, acknowledged that they were having trouble feeding the cubs. With rumours circulating online that one of the cubs had died, Bancroft This Week reached out to the Drysdales for an update on their health, however did not receive a response as of press time Tuesday.

Despite the calls from the community for the municipality to enact legislation regulating the keeping of exotic animals in captivity, council has had little to say to their constituents on the subject. However, in light of details illuminated by a Freedom of Information request provided to Bancroft This Week by Zoocheck, it has become apparent that council and staff from Hastings Highlands have been discussing the matter internally since the municipality's former mayor Vic Bodnar first received a letter from the wannabe roadside zoo owners on Oct. 9, 2020.

Having worked with dozens of municipalities in large and small, rural and urban centres throughout Canada, Zoocheck's campaigns director Julie Woodyer said she has never witnessed a council take such a long time to pass a "simple" bylaw.

"Nor have I ever seen the kind of lack of transparency from a municipal council in the past 25 years I have been doing this work," added Woodyer.

"Furthermore, the zoo has been operating without the proper zoning and while complaints have been filed, the municipality has also failed to enforce the zoning bylaw. It is unclear what they are waiting for, but if someone is injured they will surely be liable for allowing the situation to continue despite the ongoing bylaw violations."

According to Woodyer, Zoocheck has filed complaints with the Provincial Animal Welfare Services authorities about the "insufficient" eight-foot fencing and small enclosures at the roadside zoo in Maynooth, however, so far no charges have been laid. Pointing out that tigers can jump over a 12-foot fence, Woodyer said, "The waiting game by both the province and the municipality are essentially a game of Russian roulette. It is only a matter of time before an animal escapes and/or injures someone."

Ontario continues to be the only province in Canada without regulations in place to protect people from exotic animals, and look out for the health and welfare of the animals themselves. Nevertheless, the Solicitor General's office maintains that the new animal welfare system set up by the current government is "more robust, transparent, and accountable to protect animals."

Speaking on behalf of Solicitor General Sylvia Jones, spokesperson Brett Ross said animal welfare is important to the Ontario government. He said the PAWS Act regulations do currently set standards for enclosures for captive wildlife, which provide general requirements in relation to size, design and safety of enclosures for wildlife kept in captivity. In the event of a conflict between the PAWS Act or a regulation made under it and a municipal bylaw, Ross said "the provision that provides greater protection to animals

would prevail."

Under the current system, Ross said provincial inspectors - several of whom have expertise in livestock, zoos, aquariums, and equines - provide province-wide enforcement of the Provincial Animal Welfare Services Act. In addition, last November, he said the government established a multi-disciplinary PAWS Advisory Table made up of a wide range of experts, including veterinarians, agriculture representatives, academics, animal advocates and others.

Working in collaboration, Ross said the PAWS Advisory Table will provide ongoing advice to the ministry regarding the development of regulations under the PAWS Act, including any future regulations governing the prohibition or restriction of possession or breeding of exotic animals. If the province creates such regulations, he said they will be posted for public comment on Ontario's Regulatory Registry.

"Currently, the regulation of exotic animals possession can be addressed in municipal or regional bylaws, and a number of Ontario municipalities have such bylaws in place," said Ross.

"The PAWS Act enables the potential development of future regulations that can prohibit the possession or breeding of certain animals. Any future prohibitions or restrictions on possessing or breeding of certain animals would be developed in future regulations in consultation with the PAWS Advisory Table and other stakeholders as appropriate."

If anyone in Ontario believes an animal is in distress, being abused or neglected, Ross said they should call the Ontario Animal Protection Call Centre at 1-833-9ANIMAL; or, 1-833-926-4625.

Hastings Highlands Mayor Tracy Hagar released a statement on May 26, indicating that council would be receiving the first draft of the exotic animal bylaw at their June 16 meeting. In addition to the Hastings Highlands draft exotic animal bylaw, she said a "Community Engagement Strategy" will be considered by council at their meeting on June 16.

"We want to ensure that stakeholders have the opportunity to provide input, to ensure that decisions made at the municipal level are sustainable and consider feedback from residents. It's important that stakeholders appreciate the scope of municipal decisions and the importance of public participation prior to passing a bylaw," stated Mayor Hagar.

Hagar added that the strategy they plan to discuss will contain information on when bylaw readings are scheduled to appear before council, and how and when the public can provide input.