

Exotic Animal Bylaw passes second reading in HH

By Nate Smelle

Hastings Highlands council reviewed the draft of the municipality's proposed Exotic Animal Bylaw during a second reading at its meeting on July 21. Before the vote, council took time to discuss the proposed bylaw.

Praising staff for their work on developing the bylaw, Councillor Tammy Davis explained to her fellow council members why she is ready to move forward with the bylaw.

"This is an extremely comprehensive and complete bylaw," said Davis. "I believe it's fair and just. Our public input has given us the same feedback with no new recommendations. I don't have any suggestions for any further changes, and I am prepared to pass it as is presented. And, if there's no changes I am not sure why it would go for a third reading."

Council Alex Walder on the other hand was not ready to pass the bylaw just yet. Instead, he proposed a motion that would've sent the draft bylaw back to the drawing board, so that staff could add an Administrative Monetary Penalty System. After speaking with senior staff from the municipality, Walder said he decided to put forth the motion because he believes this bylaw is "short on consequences."

"The only consequences that the bylaw brings about is an approach to the judicial system for application to the Provincial Offences Act. That does not promote compliance," he said.

"I appreciate what you are saying, and I feel like this might be something that we might do in the future," responded Davis. "But, we've put forward the bylaw for public consult as is, and I am thinking that we need to pass the bylaw as is. Then at a future time, if we decide to, add AMPS as a further attachment. I just don't see that between now and Aug. 18 that we can give it its due diligence; or, that the community has the fair opportunity to review it. I think that we should move forward with what we have right now."

With the exception of Mayor Tracy Hagar who cast the only vote in favour of Walder's motion, council agreed that it would be serve the community best by passing the bylaw as is, before adding "teeth" to it through AMPS. Once Walder's motion had been defeated, council voted unanimously to pass the second reading of the bylaw. Council is now set to make its final decision regarding the Exotic Animal Bylaw after it is presented for third reading on Aug. 18.

As a not-for-profit organization focused on protecting wildlife in Ontario's roadside zoos and in the wild since 1984, Zoocheck Canada has been actively monitoring the situation with exotic animal owners Mark and Tammy Drysdale; as well as the proposed bylaw to regulate keeping exotic animals in Hastings Highlands. During this time, the organization has also been offering their expertise to council, to help the municipality avoid potential public safety issues.

Zoocheck's campaigns director Julie Woodyer said they "remain very concerned that Hastings Highlands council continues to move at an astoundingly slow pace on this issue." Weighing in on Walder's proposed amendment to the draft bylaw at the July 21 meeting, she said it would have slowed the process further, and could have resulted in another public consultation.

"While this glacially slow treatment of exotic animals plods on, more animals have arrived in Hastings Highlands, and more are likely to come prior to the final reading of the bylaw," Woodyer said. "The Municipality of Lambton Shores, where the roadside menagerie owner resided previously, passed a bylaw just a couple of weeks after learning there were dangerous animals in their municipality. Dozens of other municipalities have also passed bylaws very quickly when they've learned of dangerous animals in their communities."

Highlighting how Hastings Highlands council has "wasted" nine months since learning that a roadside zoo was being planned for the municipality, Woodyer said council's lack of action has allowed other exotic animal owners to move their animals to the

municipality. She said this means that Hastings Highlands may now have to waste significant staff resources and taxpayer dollars dealing with circumstances they could have prevented.

"The roadside menagerie near Maynooth has been open to the public on an occasional basis for a number of months on a property that is not zoned for a zoo or exotic animal use," Woodyer said. "Yet, for some reason, the municipality hasn't enforced their own zoning bylaws. We hope they'll do better once they pass a new Exotic Animal Bylaw. Since the province of Ontario won't act, safeguarding the residents of Hastings Highlands and the animals themselves is their responsibility."