

Feeling safer in South Algonquin



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Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

According to Holly Hayes, the clerk and treasurer for South Algonquin Township, the township is currently beginning the public consultation phase of their community safety and wellbeing plan, or CSWB, mandated by the Police Act and the Ontario government to be in place by Jan. 1, 2021. Taking a cue from the seven municipalities in North Hastings that worked together, the four municipalities of South Algonquin, Brudenell, Lyndoch and Raglan, Killaloe, Hagarty and Richards, and Madawaska Valley have come together to create a community safety and well being plan, with the guidance and expertise of Dr. Meara Sullivan.

Dr. Sullivan is a community and restorative justice specialist with over 20 years experience in her field. Her experience led her to be hired by the seven municipalities of North Hastings last year to help them to come up with their own CSWB programs.

“I was hired by South Algonquin, Brudenell, Lyndoch and Raglan, Killaloe, Hagarty and Richards, and Madawaska Valley based upon my experience with North Hastings as well as my teaching experience in Community, Safety and Well-Being at Loyalist College,” she says.

This lecture at Loyalist College is a CSWB planning course to teach clerks and CAOs the fundamentals of CSWB and how to plan their own programs for their municipalities.

Hayes acknowledges that Dr. Sullivan has been really good at helping South Algonquin and the other municipalities through the whole process.

?One of the things she has really emphasized is that we really need to keep asking people about these surveys, so we don't just put it out and leave it for two months and expect everyone to get back to us. So, she's been really good at implementing lessons learned [from her time helping the North Hastings' municipalities with their CSWB], and things that really worked well for them or wording or that sort of thing. We've really benefited and had the luxury of that information,? she says.

The Community Safety and Well Being Program was mandated by the Police Services Act and the province of Ontario's Bill 68, the Safer Ontario Act. This mandate requires municipalities to come up with a multi-sectional advisory committee composed of a number of cross-cultural partners, including police services, local service providers of physical and mental health care, education, community and social services and children and youth services. This committee, with a multitude of societal perspectives, will invariably come up with a cohesive CSWB and a successful plan moving forward.

Hayes says that back in March, 2020, they held a service provider/stakeholder meeting at the Madawaska Valley council chambers, with as many service providers in attendance as possible.

?We had a conversation about where the duplication was and all that, and did a survey back then, and we've taken that information and analyzed it. Now the next step is to get out and get input from the public,? she says.

All Ontario municipalities must have a CSWB in place by Jan. 1, 2021. However, due to COVID-19 and the setbacks that municipal governments have undergone as a result, that deadline has been extended to July 1, 2021.

The coordinating committee for the CSWB includes Holly Hayes, clerk and treasurer from South Algonquin Township, Gwen Dombroski, deputy clerk from Madawaska Valley, Tammy Gorgerat, deputy clerk/treasurer from Killaloe Hagarty and Richards, Suzanne Klatt, clerk and treasurer from Madawaska Valley, Michelle Mantifel, clerk and treasurer from Brudenell, Lyndoch and Raglan and Susan Sheridan clerk and treasurer from Killaloe, Hagarty and Richards. Dr. Meara Sullivan is, of course, the CSWB coordinator.

?Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, in March we suspended our planning for several months so the municipalities could focus on the immediate needs of the pandemic. And so, we're really just getting back into it now, and that's exciting because we're beginning the second phase of planning which is all about the community consultation,? she says.

Sullivan says that they are just in the process of finalizing a community consultation survey, which will be available online and in paper format, and will run for about two months.

?After public consultations, data will be analyzed and at that point we'll consider what further consultation, focus groups or town halls that would happen,? she says.

Sullivan is glad that the provincial government extended the deadline to submit the CSWB until July 1 from January 1 of next year, considering that the municipalities she's working with suspended the planning process for a few months and so much of the future is uncertain at this time. She says that even with the extension, the push is still on to get the CSWB ready and done, as there is a lot to accomplish.

?We've established a coordinating committee and an advisory committee. We've surveyed local service providers on assets, areas of risk, vulnerable populations, and now we're just about to begin the consulting process,? she says. ?That's going to be really exciting, gathering information from area residents and then we have the analysis and the dissemination of all that information.?

Hayes says they have a plan in the making and are going to keep plugging away at it.

?But if we have that extra time, and we learn something in the process we'll kind of decide once the data is in what's next, or maybe we'll just write the report,? she says. ?We'll keep an eye on what the province is saying and doing but we're doing the best we can do to keep it as on track as possible under these weird circumstances.?