

HH council directs staff to create exotic animal bylaw



By Nate Smelle

With Hastings County developing an exotic animal bylaw template for local municipalities to use; and, both Limerick Township and the Municipality of Highlands East recently passing their own exotic animal bylaws, the pressure is mounting for Hastings Highlands to approve their own bylaw. While council has yet to pass legislation regulating the keeping of exotic animals in the municipality, they did emerge from a closed session meeting on April 21 to announce that they were one step closer to doing so.

After consulting with the municipality's lawyer during the closed session, council directed staff to produce a draft exotic animal bylaw and present it for a first reading at an upcoming meeting. Although a timeline as to when the bylaw will be presented has yet to be determined, CAO David Stewart said municipal staff will continue to work hard to deliver all of council's directives in a timely manner.

Considering council has had access to the exotic animal bylaw template they asked the county to create since mid-February, many in the community are left wondering why other municipalities faced with similar circumstances have been able to establish a bylaw more quickly. As one of the world's leading wildlife protection organizations Zoocheck Canada has been defending the interests of animals in captivity and in the wild since 1984.

Since the news broke that big cat and exotic animal owners Mark and Tammy Drysdale were planning to open a roadside zoo in Hastings Highlands, Zoocheck's campaigns director Julie Woodyer has been advocating for council to pass a bylaw that helps protect the public and the animals to be on display. Drawing attention to how at Zoocheck they have seen councils develop and pass a bylaw within a week of finding out about a "seriously dangerous situation like exists in the Maynooth area," she said they are "extremely disappointed" in how slow Hastings Highlands has been to respond to this issue.

"This council has been aware of the safety risks for nearly six months and we know of at least one person who has already been injured at the facility, yet the council continues to move at a snail's pace," said Woodyer. "We can only assume that they are not taking the threat seriously. The bylaw developed by the county is fair and allows people who are already in the municipality with exotic animals to keep them so long as they are cared for and kept in facilities that meet professional standards. No one is saying the animals have to go, we are only saying if they are to be kept in the municipality they must be properly contained and cared for. This is about protecting the public and animals."

According to Woodyer, there have also already been several complaints about bylaw infractions pertaining to noise and the Drysdales allegedly inviting members of the public to view animals without proper zoning. Noting that nothing has been done by the

municipality to address the situation, she said it has created tension among the neighbours to the facility.

"There is no excuse for leaving this highly volatile situation unregulated in Hasting Highlands," declared Woodyer.

"We implore council to take action quickly. They have had more than enough time to do proper due diligence and deal with this very dangerous situation. The council in Hastings Highlands regularly organizes special meetings to deal with important issues, we hope they will treat this issue with the same sense of urgency and organize a special meeting as soon as staff have taken the country template bylaw and put it into a form for council to vote on which should not take more than a week to prepare."

Bancroft This Week reached out to big cat owners Mark and Tammy Drysdale for comment regarding the alleged injury which took place on their property near Maynooth in February, however did not receive a response as of press time Tuesday.