

OPP confirms 'movement' of exotic animals at roadside zoo in HH

By Nate Smelle

With Ontario Provincial Police cruisers coming and going from the site of the proposed roadside zoo on a regular basis over the past week; and, no word from exotic animal owners Mark and Tammy Drysdale regarding the health of their lions, tigers, and other animals, the rumour mill in North Hastings has been turning overtime.

In an attempt to set the record straight, Bancroft This Week reached out to several key stakeholders in the community who have been actively engaged in dealing with the potential risks to public safety and animal welfare that come with allowing exotic animal ownership in the municipality.

Kerry Schmidt is an officer with Ontario Provincial Police's Highway Safety Division. Pointing out that the situation with the Drysdales' exotic animals is not an official OPP investigation, he said "we are aware of it, and we are there to ensure public safety for everybody, including the well-being of the animals."

While Schmidt would not comment on the details of the investigation, or the health status and whereabouts of the Drysdales and their animals, he did acknowledge that there had been "movement of animals." He also confirmed that the OPP was on the scene to ensure that the animals and the community are safe.

"As far as any other ongoing investigations, that's all still ongoing, and we can't comment on anything else associated with that," said Schmidt. "I don't know how long it will be like this, but I do suspect that there would be more information coming from the ministry as to what's taking place here, and what the next steps will be."

Brent Ross, a spokesperson with the Ministry of the Solicitor General did confirm that Provincial Animal Welfare Services is currently investigating the matter. Indicating that the ministry is on top of the situation; and, that they have already issued multiple compliance orders under the PAWS Act, he said because it is still an active investigation, he could not comment any further.

Co-founder and spokesperson for Citizens for a Safe and Humane Hastings Highlands, Roy Mitchell said in light of recent events they have become extremely concerned for the public's safety, and the welfare of the Drysdales' animals. Explaining the reason for the groups heightened concern, he said, "the public has been kept in the dark because the zoo owners are refusing to be transparent about the situation. They shut down their Facebook page, closed down the zoo to the public and neither of the two owners are at the site full-time. There was no one on site until provincial authorities finally brought in police. The OPP have been there day and night for the last couple of days."

Noting how the group is not alone in their concerns for the animals and the community, Mitchell said people are continuing to show their support, share information, and stay engaged with the issue on their Facebook page. Through monitoring this page and speaking with other residents of the municipality, he said it has become clear that there is "overwhelming support" for the Exotic Animal Bylaw. Mitchell said it is also obvious that the public wants council to pass the bylaw "now." If council doesn't "show leadership and pass the bylaw," he said there's nothing stopping another roadside zoo from attempting to operate in Hastings Highlands.

As speculation regarding the whereabouts of the Drysdales and the health and welfare of their animals continues to grow, Hastings Highlands council is preparing to hold their third and final reading of the proposed draft of the municipality's Exotic Animal Bylaw on Aug. 18. At this meeting, council is expected to make a decision on whether or not the municipality will move forward with regulating the keeping of exotic animals in Hastings Highlands.

Mayor Tracy Hagar said the municipality will be putting together a media release "as soon as the time is right for all involved." Bancroft This Week reached out to the Drysdales as well, however did not receive a response as of press time Tuesday.