

Priority setting

To the Editor,

I had really hoped I wouldn't have to write this letter.

But recent events in our municipality, Hastings Highlands, (HH) require it in my view. Because at the end of the day the primary role for our council members (read legislators) is to ensure that legislation/public policy is consistent with their constituents' needs. If not, they should fight to correct obviously poor legislation/public policy even if it is set by the provincial or the federal governments.

About six years ago it became apparent that no municipalities relying on the OPP for policing had any idea about how they were charged. They had simply put up with the bill and passed it on to taxpayers. And costs were rising at an alarming rate. This should have been a wake up call for our council. The OPP promised to fix this, and they came up with a new formula, which, while more easily understood, was much worse for ratepayers

In HH the cost increase for this new formula was projected as follows in a letter I wrote last year: 'Overall it means policing will rise to about 30 per cent of the municipal budget, regardless of whether there is any crime or real need. And no negotiation with the cost structure which the Auditor General has clearly stated is out of control.'

If you don't believe this, look at your 2016 HH proposed budget. Policing is up 56 per cent from 2014. In one year, the cost increase alone dwarfs the total cost of the former curbside pickup. Over \$1 million for policing in HH in 2016. So this is an issue that has been a clear concern for at least two years for taxpayers.

Now HH is one of about 250 small rural municipalities in Ontario. We can't expect HH to take on the province on all issues of poor public policy which are a concern for constituents. Nor can we expect they will always win these battles.

But the Rural Ontario Municipal Association (ROMA) of which we are a member and pay dues is expressly mandated to advocate for good public legislation for rural municipalities. They had the OPP speak at meetings back in 2014 about why they need huge increases to fund their operations. And the provincial government promised they will investigate the Auditor General's report from 2012 and reform the OPP to deliver the service levels they are supposed to at reasonable cost.

Now what have your council in HH been doing about this big problem for taxpayers?

Well they set a strategic priority which can be found on the website: 'Develop a Lobbying Strategy for issues impacting the municipality and imposed by senior levels of government, e.g. policing costs, competitive grants, and legislation.' Despite all of the above, it was not until February 2016 that HH and a few other rural municipalities decided to talk to ROMA about what they were doing on their behalf on the policing cost issue. ROMA's response: 'Is there a problem with the OPP pricing formula?'

And no council member was aware of any progress on the provincial investigation into the 2012 Auditor General's scathing report on the OPP at a recent council meeting

In the meantime we taxpayers are paying our council to pass on huge increases in our taxes as a result of an outrageous police charging formula, and council don't even have the courtesy to tell us they don't care and aren't doing a thing about this issue

Here is some advice to our council: fire ROMA if they won't lobby on behalf of their membership on issues of poor public policy. That will get their attention and perhaps get us a body that is interested in helping to get good provincial legislation on policing charges and many other issues of concern to rural municipalities.

We taxpayers in HH are getting the short end of the stick on other strategic issues while our council spends their time fussing about potholes and expense reimbursement policies that have little impact on our burgeoning costs.

Setting strategic priorities? Council knows how to write the words on what they should be doing.

Actually doing it? Not on their radar yet.

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