

South Algonquin urges province to address climate change

By Mike Riley

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

At the Sept. 1 South Algonquin Township council meeting, Councillor Bongo Bongo drafted a letter and a resolution to be sent to the office of Ontario Premier Doug Ford requesting urgent action to address climate change, spurred to action based largely on what he called the grim findings of the latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. After much discussion on this resolution, council voted in favour of it, with Councillor Joe Florent voting against it and Councillor Sandra Collins not being able to vote as her internet connection failed before she could do so.

Mayor Jane Dumas introduced this letter and resolution on climate change under action items, and asked Bongo, who drafted the letter and resolution, to say a few words on it. He began by saying he was very concerned about climate change, although he admitted he was no saint when it comes to contributing to greenhouse gasses.

"I drive a gas-powered vehicle. I belong to this economy that is contributing to climate change. There are some huge existential issues at hand, and I think it's all clearly spelled out here in the resolution I've drafted," he says.

Bongo told council that he was concerned about the climate trends and the latest report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change was very grim.

"The theme of this letter is basically to encourage our upper tiers of government to take the same approach that they took with COVID-19, to make policies based on scientific evidence that we have. We have the evidence that climate change is real, it's accelerating, we are contributing to it and we're not acting with a sense of urgency to change that," he says.

The IPCC was created to give policy makers scientific assessments on climate change on a regular basis, as well as its implications and potential future risks as well as providing them with adaptation and mitigation options. The IPCC was created in 1988 from the UN Environmental Program and the World Meteorological Organization and has 195 member countries.

In its fifth assessment cycle special report Summary for Policymakers from 2014 [IPCC, 2014: Climate Change 2014: Synthesis Report. Contribution of Working Groups I, II, and III to the Fifth Assessment Report on the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (Core Writing Team, R.K. Pachauri and L.A. Meyer, eds.) IPCC, Geneva Switzerland, 151 pp.] the IPCC said that the evidence for human influence on the climate system changes has grown since their fourth assessment cycle special report in 2007.

"It is extremely likely that more than half of the observed increase in global average surface temperature from 1951 to 2010 was caused by anthropogenic [chiefly environmental pollution arising from human activity] increase in GHG [Greenhouse Gas] concentrations and other anthropogenic forcings together. The best estimate of the human induced contribution to warming is similar to the observed warming over this period. Anthropogenic forcings have likely made a substantial contribution to surface temperature increases since the mid-20th century over every continental region except Antarctica."

The report goes on to say that these influences have also likely affected the global water cycle since 1960 and to increased surface melting of ice on land and in the sea, to the warming of the oceans to the rise in the sea levels observed since the 1970s. Currently in its sixth assessment cycle, the IPCC will produce three special reports on climate change, the last of these due in Sept. 2022. For more information, please see www.ipcc.ch/reports/ As a leader, Bongo said he feels accountable to younger generations, and although they can't do much as a small municipality, he says he couldn't help but to create the letter and resolution so that South Algonquin can lobby the government to address this issue more urgently.

The letter to Ontario Premier Doug Ford and the corresponding resolution put forth to council outlined that the climate was

changing, and the human role in this change, the findings of the IPCC, and the various deleterious effects of climate change including property damage, extreme rainfalls and flooding, disruptions to agriculture, higher frequencies of mosquito and tickborne diseases, harmful algal blooms, loss of ice fishing and more dangerous wildlife seasons. Council ended the letter to Premier Ford by urging the provincial government to utilize the same method of science-based policy that propelled the response to COVID-19 to the ongoing climate emergency, that they accelerate the end of our economic reliance on climate change inducing fossil fuels and that they embrace the development of a green economy that is guided by a sustainable environmental policy. Finally, they tell the province that they are accountable to future generations and that they and their provincial counterparts should be leaders in this change.

The letter and resolution were also sent to Minister of Energy Todd Smith, Minister of the Environment, Conservation and Parks David Piccini, Minister of Northern Development, Mines, Natural Resources and Forestry/Minister of Indigenous Affairs Greg Rickford, Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs Lisa Thompson and Minister of Infrastructure Kinga Surma.

Later in the Sept. 1 meeting, under motions of council, Dumas introduced Bongo's resolution on climate change, which was seconded by Collins. Dumas read out the resolution and what they would like to have happen. She then asked for any discussion from the council. Florent wanted to dispute that the climate changes were human-made and thought they were more attributable to natural causes like forest fires and volcanic eruptions, and listed a number of scientists he had looked up that espoused these views. While he wasn't denying that there was climate change, he said that transitioning from fossil fuels to green energy would be cost prohibitive and cost taxpayers dearly financially. He said he didn't see it as feasible that humanity was contributing to the bulk of the problem when it comes to climate change.

Councillor Dave Harper agreed with Florent that the changes in climate weren't all the fault of humans, but doubted how much a small municipality like South Algonquin could do to mitigate climate change without larger urban areas like Toronto taking decisive action to do so. Councillor Richard Shalla said he saw both sides of the story and appreciates all the work that Bongo put into the letter and resolution but also appreciates the thoughts and research from Florent and Harper.

Dumas brought up electric cars and the difficulties in getting the infrastructure in place to make them fully viable and cost effective, which led her to have difficulties with the resolution. She then asked Bongo for further thoughts on this issue.

Bongo replied that those scientists that support that climate change is real and the result of human-made emissions was overwhelming versus those who disagree, in his opinion, citing a movement called climate change denialism, that exists and has some scientists' backing.

Bongo said he feels that as a lower tier government that South Algonquin needs to start lobbying the upper tier governments so that they mobilize on this issue. He emphasized that he didn't want to see an onerous tax on ordinary Canadians but perhaps a tax on frivolous spending that causes these carbon emissions, like unnecessary air travel.

?In my opinion, we are destroying the planet and denying it isn't doing us any good. That's the whole point of this resolution. And again, I'm worried; I don't have kids but I have nieces and nephews and for me sitting here in a position of power, even though it's a small municipality, I want to show the future generations that I hear them and I'm worried. I won't stop talking about climate change. I think it's this existential problem,? he says.

After the discussion ended, council did a recorded vote on the resolution, at Bongo's request. All councillors voted for it except Florent, who voted against it and Collins, whose internet connection failed, so she was not present to register her vote. After the resolution was passed, council moved on to other business.

In an email to Bancroft This Week on Sept. 6, Bongo said that his councillor colleagues had asked some great questions in the discussion prior to the vote on the resolution.

?My response is that we cannot transition our economy away from fossil fuels fast enough. In an ideal world we would have a

carbon budget that advises us of a safe amount of carbon that might be permitted in the atmosphere without tipping the equilibrium towards catastrophic climate change. Substantial investments continue to support fossil fuel development and exploration. Our governments also reward the fossil fuels industry with tax subsidies as well. If there is any hope for a quick transition, the financial support of fossil fuels needs to end and be redirected into the development of green technologies," he says.

Bongo went on to quote Sheila Watt-Cloutier, an Inuit activist who spoke at the AMO Conference 2021, who said, "what we are lacking in our fight against climate change is imagination." According to Bongo, the COVID-19 response by governments have shown they are capable of acting urgently and creatively when needed, and the climate change crisis is a prime example of a situation requiring an urgent response from all levels of government.

"I hope that all the municipalities in Ontario see this resolution and support it. We need to continue lobbying our upper tier governments regarding the climate crisis," he says. "If we don't, we will perpetuate the cycle of inaction."