

Wollaston receives conflict resolution report

By Jim Eadie

Wollaston council received its requested mediation and conflict resolution report, prepared by Fournier Consulting Services, April 6. In February, council had requested mediation assistance to help them and township staff get back on track in a more productive and effective manner. The consultant, Stephen Fournier, conducted one-on-one interviews with all members of council and staff, as well as the former Deputy-reeve and fire chief, to prepare the report delivered. Following the special public meeting, Fournier said he would also be conducting private mediation for unnamed persons.

Fournier told the meeting that he was pleased that participants were sincere, honest, and all expressed the desire to improve their working relationships.

"You are not alone," he said. "The most important thing is that you are taking a step forward. The guidance in this report will help you with that journey with a clear set of strategies."

"The most significant interpersonal issues and conflicts largely involve a lack of mutual trust, respect, and confidence amongst members of council and staff, both at meetings and outside the council chambers," said Fournier. "Most of these problems, it is my professional belief, can be attributed to organizational gaps and failure to adhere to policies, or lack of policies that govern the behavior, working relationships, roles and responsibilities, and interactions between members of council, the public and staff. Now, most of your procedural bylaws, policies and codes of conduct have the basics, and they just need to be followed. Much of the division, and that word was used a lot, between members arise from a lack of clear protocols governing internal and external communications within and outside the organization."

The report noted that in many instances these organizational issues have spawned or contributed to interpersonal conflicts.

"The central issue underpinning the 'division' of council has been the lack of control, or the leadership role that legislatively and procedurally must be performed by the reeve as the presiding head of council," the report went on to say. "In the view of the majority of interviewees, council leadership has been problematic and inconsistent in the past with the application and enforcement of the township's rules of procedure and council code of ethics; resulting on occasion 'free-for-alls' during council meetings. However, it was also acknowledged by many that the reeve has lately made deliberate effort to improve his leadership role."

"It is common knowledge on the street that council is acting like a bunch of kids," said Fournier. "I hear a lot of that in my business. It is common. Social media parallels and even reinforces these splits in the community."

In the report, Fournier quotes the statement of one interviewee as good advice: "Use your judgement. Speak to each other openly and honestly. Don't be unnecessarily influenced by the public. Be respectful and mindful of public interests, but remember you have a role to perform. Lastly, make decisions based on sound policies, best practices and proper procedures."

Fournier provided council with numerous specific suggestions and examples of needed upgrades to township policies. He encouraged council to have a look at the duties of administrative staff, in the absence of a chief administrative officer position, and the need for a staff evaluation or appraisal process.

In addition, he encouraged council to work diligently on their strategic plan review. "A good plan is a measuring stick for performance," he said. "Even the process of doing it is just as important as the plan. It will promote teamwork, working together between staff and council and the community."

In summary, Fournier encouraged everyone involved to always speak respectfully.

"Remember, in the end a majority vote is a majority vote," he said, "People disagree, but a decision has been made, and a majority decision must be respected. You are entitled to your opinion, and to express your point of view, but the decision must be respected. Speak eloquently, state your case clearly, keep your opinion, but respect the decision and move on."

The full Wollaston Township Mediation and Conflict Resolution Project - Final Report is available online at the Wollaston web site: www.wollastontownship.ca.