

Here are the highlights from the Lanark County Council meetings held Wednesday, June 23.

Appreciation Expressed for Call Centre Assistance: The Board of Health for the Leeds, Grenville & Lanark District Health Unit expressed its appreciation for support the county has provided to its call centre.

“Several weeks ago, when we recognized that the provincial call centre was unable to meet the needs in Leeds, Grenville and Lanark, you quickly responded to our request for help,” said Board Chair Doug Malanka in a letter to council. “The LGL Call Centre is now a mainstay of the vaccine program.”

Malanka added the county’s flexibility and willingness to adjust how the call centre works over the past few weeks has been much appreciated. “We could not deliver the vaccine program without your support and continued partnership.” For more information, contact Leslie Drynan, Clerk/Deputy CAO, at 1-888-9-LANARK, ext. 1502.

Council Supports Motion for Hotline: Council passed a motion in support of a resolution by Owen Sound to endorse a suicide and crisis prevention hotline.

The motion notes the federal government has passed a motion to adopt 988, a national three-digit suicide and crisis hotline, adding the COVID-19 pandemic has increased demand for suicide prevention services by 200%. “Existing suicide prevention hotlines require the user to remember a 10-digit number and go through directories or be placed on hold,” it stated. The 988 crisis line would ensure critical barriers are removed for those in crisis.

The motion was directed to Federal Minister of Health Patty Hadju, MPs and MPPs, the CRTC and all Ontario municipalities. For more information, contact Leslie Drynan, Clerk/Deputy CAO, at 1-888-9-LANARK, ext. 1502.

2020 Housing Report Card Presented: Council has accepted the “2020 Housing Report Card” following a presentation by Housing Services Manager Shawna Stone at the community services committee meeting earlier this month. The required annual report outlines progress on the 10-Year Housing and Homelessness Plan and describes the range of programs offered through the county.

Stone said the report addresses up to the end of 2020, and a lot of work has been done already so far this year. At the time of the report, the centralized wait list to access rent-geared-to-income housing was at 720, with 68 of those as special priority. The waitlist increased by 4.3% since 2019. One-bedroom units are in the greatest demand, and Carleton Place has longest wait list (more than eight years), followed by Perth and Smiths Falls.

There are three groups providing subsidized housing in the county, including Lanark County Housing, rent supplements through private landlords, and agreements with five providers for non-profit housing, for a total of 756 units in the community housing portfolio.

Stone outlined numerous capital projects completed at various units last year despite COVID restrictions. There are several Community Homelessness Prevention Initiatives managed by the county. The Housing Options Program, which helps those at risk of being homeless or experiencing homelessness, helped 642 eligible people in 2020 with such supports as rent, utilities, moving costs, food/gas, hotel/motel or transportation. “In 2020, many people were displaced because of the pandemic,” Stone said. “This, coupled with a low vacancy rate and high rental costs, contributed to the challenge to find secure, affordable housing.”

Stone outlined partnerships with Victim Services for after-hours emergencies, and the new contribution by the county to the Mobile Crisis Response Team in partnership with Lanark County Mental Health, Smiths Falls Police Service and Lanark County OPP in recognition of the number of referrals involving housing and homelessness and other risk factors.

“On the homelessness front, we are working with a new coordinator, a new working group and a consultant,” Stone said. The total homeless households is currently less than what was reported last year, but the duration of stay was longer since there was little choice of places to go.

The provincial Social Services Relief Fund had two phases to assist through the pandemic in 2020, supporting operating and capital projects. The largest portfolio was under food security, followed by emergency shelter (hotel/motel stays and the COVID Isolation Centre), and 89 households were assisted with the rent bank.

“The 2020 Report comes at a time when we are more aware than ever of the work that is needed to address the housing crisis,” said Warden Christa Lowry (Mississippi Mills Mayor). “While we have made progress in some areas, there is still more to be done. We remain committed to the goals and outcomes in the 10-Year Plan.”

CAO Kurt Greaves said the commitment and dedication of the housing services team throughout the challenges of the pandemic has been inspiring. “We look forward to continuing our work with all stakeholders to make more housing options available and deliver solutions to those who need it most.” For more information, contact Emily Hollington, Director of Social Services, at 1-888-9-LANARK, ext. 2101.

Cell Tower Agreement Approved: Council has authorized a lease agreement with Rogers Communications Inc. for a cell tower installation on county property on County Road 511 at Campbell’s Road in Lanark Highlands.

In a report to the corporate services committee earlier this month, CAO Kurt Greaves explained the Eastern Ontario Regional Network has signed a contract with Rogers Communications to build a 5G cell network across Eastern Ontario by 2024. The county has contributed more than \$581,000 toward the project. Rogers approached the county as a potential host landowner for a new 100-metre cell tower on land that is part of the county’s managed forests. It would be located as close to the county road as possible.

Greaves indicated the site must still be finalized by Rogers and then proceed through the approval process in Lanark Highlands. The initial plan is for the tower to be activated in 2022. Rogers would pay \$10,000 per year plus inflation for five years, with the possibility of two five-year extensions. Rogers would be responsible for commercial property tax assessed and utilities. Limited tree cutting would take place, and the request has been approved by the forestry committee.

“There are clear benefits to having ubiquitous cell coverage in Lanark County for safety and economic development,” Greaves said. “The potential of some revenue return for the taxpayers on their investment for this project is an added bonus.” For more information, contact Kurt Greaves, CAO, at 1-888-9-LANARK, ext. 1101.

Auditor’s Report Accepted: Council has accepted the 2020 year-end audited financial statements, presented by Howard Allan of Allan and Partners LLP. Allan said the county’s records are in good standing. “Revenues were greater than anticipated in the budget, which was largely due to COVID funding that came through. Our expenses were very close to budget. We show a nice surplus in operations.”

Additional monies received for capital projects resulted in a surplus of about \$12 million, which was used to pay for capital projects that were planned but not completed, he said. “Overall, the county’s net financial assets improved this year.” Allan noted some estimates were made around employee future benefit obligations under assets and liabilities. Workers’ compensation is self-funded by the county. “When we look at municipal equity, it is pretty handsome,” he said. “Financial assets appear to be rising, but cash demands are very significant for this level of government. I am pleased that a consultant has been engaged to look at long-term planning.”

Allan said the province would likely view Lanark County as being in a low-risk position, but some adjustments might need to be made in the long-range plan. “Assessment has been frozen for the past two years and there could be a significant jump.” He added the rates charged for the services provide place the county in a good position compared to its neighbours.

Allan thanked Treasurer Kevin Wills and his staff for their help in completing the 2020 audit. “Overall, the audit went well. The records are excellent and very professionally done.” For more information, contact Kevin Wills, Treasurer, at 1-888-9-LANARK, ext. 1323.

ALUS Lanark Program to be Developed: Council has supported in principle a partnership with local conservation authorities to develop an Alternative Land Use Service (ALUS) chapter for Lanark County.

At the public works committee meeting on Wednesday, CAO Kurt Greaves explained the Lanark County Stewardship Council held an information session about the ALUS program in Fall 2019, and when the county established its first Climate Action Plan in January 2020, one of the goals was to help establish it. County representatives have met several times with ALUS Canada, conservation authorities and the stewardship council to discuss its potential.

ALUS is designed to deliver on goals of biodiversity, climate change adaptation and greenhouse gas reduction in an agriculture-based program. The proposed ALUS Lanark program would be in partnership with the conservation authorities, who would act as leads and build on their existing stewardship programs. The county's role would be to help promote program benefits and future successes and offer any other needed support, such as consideration of an annual financial contribution to the program.

"This is a great way to leverage the existing work of our conservation authorities in the areas of ecosystem services in Lanark County, including clean air, clean water, carbon sequestration, erosion control, flood mitigation, pollinator support and wildlife habitat," Greaves said. For more information, contact Kurt Greaves, CAO, at 1-888-9-LANARK, ext. 1101.

Council Expresses Concern about Permanent Remote Learning: Council passed a motion authorizing the warden to write a letter to the Minister of Education expressing support for the Upper Canada District School Board's concerns about a permanent remote learning option.

This follows a presentation at the community services committee meeting earlier this month by John McAllister, Upper Canada District School Board (UCDSB) Chair, highlighting concerns about a possible proposed plan by the Ministry of Education to retain and expand the remote learning options put in place to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic in Ontario.

The motion notes the current online model used by UCDSB was not intended to be more than a contingency for program delivery. "Both the emergency models of remote learning implemented during the pandemic, as well as the proposed models highlighted by the media (regarding pending legislation) in March 2021, do not address concerns about optimal learning environments for students or the way that we can sustain small schools in rural, remote and northern settings." The motion urges widespread consultation with school boards, municipalities, students and parents regarding the proposed changes to make remote learning a permanent option in the provincial education system and its potential impacts.

A fully functional online learning consortium (the Ontario eLearning Consortium) currently exists for students who require specialized courses not available at their school. It is fully compatible with rural, remote and northern schools, does not affect student enrollment counts for the operation of small schools, is fully funded and involves local staff in the delivery of the program.

The motion recognizes the necessity for this existing online learning platform and that enhancements to technology and online/remote learning options are part of the future, but supports the board in its concerns related to permanent remote learning. The letter will also seek clarification on the proposed legislative changes and outline the county's concerns, including the lack of communication and consultation, potential adverse effects on the sustainability of small rural schools and municipalities, reduced funding levels over the long term, and diminished local influence on education. For more information, contact Leslie Drynan, Clerk/Deputy CAO, at 1-888-9-LANARK, ext. 1502.

Upcoming Meetings: Special County Council, Wednesday, June 30, 5 p.m.

Please note there are no regular meetings scheduled in July. County Council, Wednesday, Aug. 11, 5 p.m.; Community Services, Aug. 11 (following County Council); Corporate Services, Aug. 11 (following Community Services). **County Council, Wednesday, Aug. 25, 5 p.m.;** Public Works, Aug. 25 (following County Council); Economic Development, Aug. 25 (following Public Works). Watch for details about public access to meetings on agendas and through online notifications. For more information, contact 1-888-9-LANARK, ext. 1502. Like "LanarkCounty1" on Facebook and follow "@LanarkCounty1" on Twitter!

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