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Norfolk council weighs in on challenges and opportunities ahead

Hastings Drive an ongoing frustration for councillors

News Jan 26, 2017 by [Jeff Tribe \(/toronto-author/jeff-tribe/097C5208-C43E-46AF-B75E-EE826DCC7ED3/\)](/toronto-author/jeff-tribe/097C5208-C43E-46AF-B75E-EE826DCC7ED3/) [✉](mailto:jtribe@norfolknews.ca)
(<mailto:jtribe@norfolknews.ca>) Norfolk News



Mayor Charlie Luke speaks at the 2017 mayor's levee. - Photo by Jeff Tribe

As 2016 eased into 2017, Norfolk News surveyed members of Norfolk County council with the following questions:

- What was your council highlight and challenge of 2016?
- Do you have a new year's resolution?
- What opportunities and challenges do you see for council as 2017 unfolds?
- Any comments you'd like to add?

MAYOR CHARLIE LUKE

2016 highlight

"A couple of major projects completed in a timely fashion." The Main Street construction in Port Dover. The resurfacing of Queensway East in Simcoe. The Engineering RFP (request for proposal) approved for Misner Dam. The resurfacing of Erie Boulevard, Long Point. Construction start of new Delhi public library.

2016 challenge

County manager Keith Robicheau moving to North Bay. "We are losing a good person and a very good county manager."

2017 resolution

"To simply try my best to improve my service and support to the citizens of Norfolk County."

2017 opportunity

Select a new county manager that will be effective in working with council and staff and the public.

2017 challenge

To bring in a realistic 2017 budget.

General comments

"I would like to personally thank council members and staff for the long hours and late meetings that were needed in order to complete the county's business. The extra time spent by everyone is very much appreciated."

DEPUTY MAYOR JIM OLIVER

2016 highlight

Successful road reconstruction projects, including at Turkey Point, as well as in the big picture, the completion of downtown portion of the rebuild in Port Dover – a huge project, not without controversy, but also a targeted timeframe working "with minimum disruption during the big tourist season."

2016 challenge

Disappointment the official plan review is not further along toward completion. Oliver had hoped to see it completed by 2016 or early in 2017, rather than toward the end of the year, which now seems a reasonable projection. "It's a big deal, a big project, but in my opinion, it is taking too long."

2017 resolution

Honoured to be chosen as deputy mayor, Oliver looks forward to doing justice to the office for the year.

2017 opportunity

Two initiatives through South Central Ontario Region, firstly a company which proposes to attract investment from China. "They have chosen SCOR as the region they are interested in promoting, and of course, Norfolk County is a big part of that."

Secondly, a proposal SCOR will be making to the provincial environment minister regarding food and water security, in part seeking benefits as it relates to the carbon cap-and-trade arrangement. “We stand to be benefiting from these kind of things.”

2017 challenge

The budget. Council was able to put together the 2016 version with a minimal tax increase, a tougher prospect for the coming year as council strives to provide an acceptable level of services, affordably. “It’s a balancing act every year and this promises to be no different.”

General comments

The deputy mayor sees council wrestling with what to do with an aging rec centre pool facility and a “completely aged” seniors centre. “It’s living on life support,” noting sooner rather than later, a decision will have to be made on whether to repair or replace those two facilities, potentially within a broader community hub.

COUN. PETER BLACK

2016 challenge

Hastings Drive zoning amendment.

“After repeated storms over many years that swept away most of the cottages on Hastings Drive in Long Point, government agencies recognized the danger to life and property and included policy for an area with a dynamic beach such as Hastings Drive: that no development be allowed save for existing cottages to be grandfathered in.

“Norfolk Township council included limited uses in their hazard land zoning. In 2001, it became part of the newly amalgamated Norfolk County zoning bylaw.

“For years this was accepted, and many government agencies noted the environmentally fragile nature of this area, having the lake on one side and, a short distance on the opposite side, the former mouth and delta of Big Creek, a significant wetland.”

“The issue arose when vacant lot owners decided to challenge the bylaw and use trailers in this identified unsafe area. Council decided to change the zoning allowing trailers, despite it being against their own Official Plan and many other government agencies. Council was challenged, and their decision went to the Ontario Municipal Board.

“Close to the date of the hearing, the council finally realized their position was indefensible and dropped out of the process. With no solution, Hastings Drive remains an ongoing exercise in frustration. It will not go away until council recognizes that any type of development in this area poses a serious risk to life, property and the environment.”

2017 resolution

“It is the same one I make every year: continue to provide a voice in council for the residents of Ward 5, Simcoe and rural area and to work hard making decisions based on what is in the best interest for all Norfolk County.”

2017 challenge

“It will be a challenge to find a new county manager with the same high level of experience and credentials as Mr. Robicheau, willing to work with a council that has not yet come together as a team. It is far more productive to work with staff then to constantly challenge their integrity. Yes, challenge their reports, but not their integrity. Staff should not be viewed as the enemy, but as partners with council in a large corporate entity. If this style of oversight persists, not only might council find it challenging to replace our outgoing county manager, but may also see other valuable staff leave. The challenge is for both council and staff to work together as a team. We all deserve respect – council, staff and taxpayers.”

Black identified upkeep of the county’s road network as an ongoing challenge. “The challenge is to bring our road reserve account out of the red and into the black. A revised roads need study is required to address our failing infrastructure. The criteria needs to be: cognizant of all areas, taking into consideration the existing state of repair, consider use through traffic counts, and consider various options for repair.”

COUN. DOUG BRUNTON

2016 challenge

Hastings Drive. “That one stuck out to me. Every time we turned around, we had something to deal with.”

2017 resolution

Fiscal responsibility, especially toward the county's agricultural and retiree base. "It's all about money. We have a service to provide to the taxpayers, but we have to do it in a way people can afford, plain and simple."

2017 opportunity

In consultation with Haldimand, Brunton believes Norfolk's investments could perform better and plans to look into alternative options. "I'm not sure we're making the best returns."

2017 challenge

Revitalizing the downtown in a world where major chains in the United States are laying off people and closing stores due to a continued emphasis on online shopping. "It's going to be very hard to revitalize our downtown with single-source stores."

General comments

"I think we have to take a hard look at where we're spending our money." Each councillor worries about his own ward, but big-ticket items must be prioritized. "We have to zero in on what's important."

COUN. MIKE COLUMBUS

2016 highlight

"The highest point of 2016 was to see two major development projects take place in my ward, those being expansion of the Delhi Medical Health Centre and expansion and renovation of the Delhi library."

2016 challenge

"The toughest point of 2016 would have to be dealing with issues pertaining to development/no development on Hastings Drive, Long Point."

2017 resolution

"Continue to do my level best in serving the taxpayers of Ward 3 and Norfolk as a whole."

2017 challenge

To hire a replacement county manager to lead staff and work with council to deliver programs and services as effectively and efficiently as possible. Also to maintain any budget increase at or below rate of inflation, delivering value for the tax dollar yet maintaining delivery of programs and services.

COUN. ROGER GEYSENS

2016 highlight

Finding a caretaker for the Langton Community Centre, a frustrating journey that "caused some hard feelings" through the seven months it took to complete. Geysens is also pleased to see efforts to get high-speed internet to rural areas such as Wycombe.

2016 challenge

The ongoing situation at Hastings Drive. Unfortunately, said Geysens, council did not go forward with the bylaw it developed. "In the end it was probably a better solution than trying to push it forward."

2017 opportunity

Making continued progress in terms of developing a wine region, and other agricultural developments and projects. There are also "all kinds of things" on tap for the area, including another major industry "in the works" for Courtland.

2017 challenge

Replacing county manager Keith Robicheau. “Hopefully we can come up with someone to fill his shoes.”

COUN. NOEL HAYDT

2016 highlight

“I’m always happy when I’m able to work with our staff to help a local constituent or any resident solve their issues. I have been pushing hard for projects to be sent to tender and getting rid of sole-source contracts. I’m very happy to say that we have now saved hundreds of thousands.”

2016 challenge

Hasting Drive. “As a property owner I must recuse myself. People still come to me for details but I only know what the public knows, and it’s been very frustrating to be unable to help resolve things.”

2017 opportunity

“Improved internet connectivity will allow businesses to have a further reach to improve sales, will help businesses that are in that field be able to expand to help bring high-paying IT jobs to Norfolk and give residents the service that they deserve.”

2017 challenge

“Norfolk County has a fiscal challenge ahead and this needs to be addressed immediately. Limited financial reports coming to council, while being late on our yearly filings, are holding up decisions that need to be made now. Our reserves are in a large negative position and we will be taking on a massive amount of debt over the next few years. As debt payments increase, there will be a rise in taxes to cover those costs, and the need for savings will also come to the forefront.

“We need to look at the services we are providing to residents and find out which ones are important to them. A service review will also look into how Norfolk County is run and point out efficiencies to reduce our operating budget.”

General comments

“As a first-time councillor, I find that there is a huge learning curve as we are faced with new issues continuously. It’s a very rewarding job that also comes with a certain amount of frustration. I like to look at Norfolk County as a whole, as well as my ward, to make my decisions, and the feedback I receive from constituents is very important to me.”

COUN. HAROLD SONNENBERG

2016 highlight

Moving forward with the sewage treatment plant in Waterford. “Development in Waterford can’t go ahead until we have that new facility.”

2016 challenge

“The Misner Dam is a great big unfixable problem.” Sonnenberg is concerned with the price tag simply for engineering, without a dollar spent on repairs yet. “Who knows what this is going to cost?”

2017 resolution

“I don’t have illusions of grandeur. I’d be glad to maintain what we have.”

2017 opportunity

“If you drive around Norfolk, you see facilities going up you don’t see anywhere else,” referring to dairy, ginseng and vegetable growing and packing operations. “I’m glad to see our agricultural base is still there, and I think expanding.”

2017 challenge

“Increased development is always a challenge.” Sonnenberg would prefer to see industrial and commercial growth along with the current emphasis on residential, while noting the challenge of being off the 400-series highways.

COUN. JOHN WELLS

2016 highlight

Fair results while working within the budget. “We were able to accomplish a lot and stay within the framework we had set.”

2016 challenge

Hastings Drive. “It’s not going away, we spent a lot of time, but never resolved the issue.” Based on a variety of viewpoints, any resolution will not please everyone. “That’s the most difficult part of our jobs.”

2017 challenge

The budget. “We have more and more demands placed on us and people don’t want their taxes to go up.” Norfolk is a big area with varying needs, along with localized expectations that sometimes forget the big picture, which is the job of council. “We’ll do the best we can and next year we’ll probably have the same problems we have this year.”

General comments

“We’re going to get something right,” Wells predicted with a laugh. “It’s going to be a surprise, but we’re going to get something right. Who knows what that will be?”

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