

Amended Exotic Animal Bylaw should pass at April council meeting

By Mike Riley

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Limerick Township council discussed passing an exotic animal bylaw at its March 15 council meeting. With the controversy that has arisen from the Drysdale family in Hastings Highlands having exotic animals and wanting to keep them on their property, other municipalities in Hastings County are passing their own exotic animal bylaws, based upon a template they received from Hastings County. Some municipalities already do have such bylaws, like the Town of Bancroft and Carlow Mayo. Limerick is one such example of a township looking to pass their own exotic animal bylaw based upon the county's template. After a preliminary discussion and some proposed changes, they decided to defer its passage until their April council meeting.

Hastings County came up with a template for an exotic animal bylaw based upon requests from its member municipalities. With the Drysdale family keeping exotic animals on their property in Hastings Highlands, these municipalities were looking for some guidance on how to proceed with regulating exotic animals within their own townships. The county had been working on coming up with this template since Dec. 2020, getting input from a variety of organizations that have experience dealing with exotic animals and bylaws related to them. Upon its unveiling in Feb. 2021, the county's director of planning and development Justin Harrow called it a good start for municipalities without a bylaw and also a useful tool for those wanting to update their existing bylaws.

The template allows councils that adopt it to regulate or prohibit the keeping of exotic animals within the borders of their townships. The exotic animals on the list in this template include big cats (lions, tigers, leopard, lynx, ocelot, serval), canidae (wolf, coyote, fox), non-human primates (lemurs, monkeys, apes), elephants, hippopotamus, camel, giraffe, zebra, tapir, rhinoceros, owls, hawks, eagles, harriers, osprey, common snapping turtles, crocodiles, alligators, caiman, reticulated python, ball python, boa constrictor, yellow anaconda and venomous snakes and lizards. While the aforementioned animals would be banned, the template legislation provides a grandfather clause, which would allow those who owned these animals before the bylaw was passed to keep them. This grandfathered status would be lost if the animal potentially jeopardizes the health or safety of any individual, it is improperly or unsafely housed, enclosed or cared for, or if it attacks a person or animal.

Ontario is the only province in Canada that doesn't have legislation to regulate exotic animals. However, in Jan. 2020 the Ontario government passed the Provincial Animal Welfare Services Act, which contains animal welfare regulations and enforcement with regard to exotic animals in Ontario. Mayor Carl Stefanski acknowledged that they were setting a precedent when they pass this bylaw and pointed out that it was only a template and could be amended to make it uniquely their own bylaw.

Council engaged in a vigorous discussion on the finer points of the bylaw template, specifically what constitutes a domesticated animal. For instance, if domesticated, would an emu be alright to own? Stefanski also brought up wild boars in eastern Ontario and the destruction that they can cause, and suggested they also be added to the list. Overall, council felt that more discussion and changes were needed on this bylaw before it is passed and thus deferred it for possible passage to the next council meeting in April.

Stefanski said that the councillors will each contribute to the bylaw template at the next council meeting and formulate what fits their needs and requirements for Limerick Township.

?A lot of effort on the county's behalf has led to this coming to fruition and aligning with other municipalities. We must be vigilant not to eliminate species that contribute to the consumables industry through legitimate businesses and are sanctioned by the appropriate agencies,? he says.

Victoria Tisdale, the clerk and treasurer, also acknowledged that council and staff had read the bylaw template through, wanted more discussion and changes before it is passed, and that it will be presented at the April council meeting.

?The majority of the proposed changes were to the animal classes, such as parrots or iguanas. Hopefully at the April council meeting we can pass this bylaw with some amendments. No special meeting will be required for this bylaw.?