

Big cat owners release recording of conversation with Mayor Bodnar



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By Nate Smelle

Late Sunday evening, big cat owners Mark and Tammy Drysdale released a video recording of a conversation they had with Hastings Highlands Mayor Vic Bodnar regarding their plans to open a roadside zoo/safari experience in the municipality.

In the recording, Mark Drysdale can be heard explaining their predicament and expressing his interest in bringing their business to Hastings Highlands. Although it is unclear exactly when the conversation took place, it becomes obvious that it occurred prior to the Drysdales purchasing their property on Peterson Road when Mark indicates they are looking for land, and Mayor Bodnar advises him regarding specific local properties that were on the market at the time.

The release of the recording comes in the wake of the news emerging from a recent council meeting held in Hastings Highlands on Jan. 20 that Hastings County's Planning and Development Committee has agreed to honour the municipality's request for assistance in developing an Exotic Animal Bylaw. With such a bylaw already in place in several municipalities throughout North Hastings; and, the neighbouring municipal of Highlands East currently in the process of creating their own similar bylaw, the pressure is mounting on Hastings Highlands council to adopt an Exotic Animal Bylaw of their own.

When asked about their reasons for releasing the recording, the Drysdales declined to comment, stating only "We are good. We recorded all conversations with mayor and council so we think the conversation recorded speaks for itself."

Roy Mitchell is a member of the Hybla community and one of a growing number of Hastings Highlands residents calling on council to pass an Exotic Animal Bylaw. Considering how an Exotic Animal Bylaw would protect the public as well as the Drysdales animals, he said council needs to pass legislation and do what is best for the community.

"What's wrong with a bylaw?" asked Mitchell. "That's all people want and council has to move on it. Drysdale has won because it will protect his animals if he can stay here. It just seems to me that there is so much outside of this argument, and then when you get this audio tape you understand that there is animosity between Drysdale and the council ... how is that going to work? The community is being divided by this. It's a really big issue and it needs leadership. I think with this recorded message we are not seeing leadership. The mayor doesn't know how to bring people together to solve this problem. My concern is leadership, and I don't see leadership coming from council."

Despite how divisive this issue has become in the community, Mitchell said it has also brought together a coalition of citizens who are 'working behind the scenes' to protect the health and safety of the public, and the exotic animals in captivity. He said the fact council included 20+ letters in their last meeting's agenda package that demanded action on this issue, is a sign that people are learning how to navigate the political system, and engage with the municipal government to help shape the community they call home.

'It's a hard fight, we're fighting it, and we believe it's justice for the animals, for the community, and we are learning. We see all these small victories and we see that we will be victorious because it's the right thing. We are showing leadership because there is a lack of it.'

Since news of the Drysdales' plans to operate a roadside zoo/safari experience in Hastings Highlands first broke, Zoocheck's executive director Rob Laidlaw has been advocating for the municipality to protect its residents by establishing an Exotic Animal Bylaw. Though pleased to see the County of Hastings act quickly to research and develop an Exotic Animal Bylaw template for consideration by County municipalities, including Hastings Highlands, he said it's unfortunate Hastings Highlands didn't act last fall to pass such a bylaw. Laidlaw said he is hopeful that once Hastings Highlands receives the template 'they will waste no time in getting control of what's going on in their own backyard.'

Expressing how happy his team at Zoocheck is to see Highlands East move forward with an exotic animal bylaw as well, Laidlaw said they recognize that the only way to keep control of exotic animals within the municipality's boundaries, and 'proactively prevent problems from developing,' is to make sure an Exotic Animal Bylaw is in place. Once passed, he said Highlands East will join more than 150 other municipalities in Ontario, and hundreds of others across Canada who have already taken this step.

Highlighting the need for Hastings Highlands council to adopt a bylaw, Laidlaw said "Because big cats are so dangerous, professional zoo and sanctuary organizations recommend specially designed enclosures with barriers approximately 16-feet high or more and they prohibit contact of any kind by members of the public, including through barriers. It's remarkable to me that anyone would think it acceptable or safe for them, or their children, to touch a big cat through a fence. People have been seriously injured or killed by big cats (and other animals) who have attacked through barriers, including here in Canada."

Bancroft This Week reached out to Mayor Vic Bodnar for comment on the issue and the recording of his conversation with the Drysdales, however did not receive a response as of press time Tuesday.