

Hastings County completes Exotic Animal Bylaw template



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By Nate Smelle

Responding to a request from Hastings Highlands council to assist in the creation of an Exotic Animal Bylaw, Hastings County's Planning and Development committee recently approved the template which could be used by its member municipalities to help regulate the keeping of exotic animals.

The county's director of planning and development, Justin Harrow described the template in his report to the committee on Feb. 16 as "a good start" for member municipalities that do not have a bylaw. He also indicated that it can be a useful tool for other municipalities interested in updating legislation they may already have in place to regulate the keeping of exotic animals. After acknowledging in the report how Ontario is the only province in Canada that does not have legislation regulating exotic animals, Harrow recommended that county council approve the template bylaw, and share it with all its member municipalities.

Basically, as defined in the template, the bylaw would "empower" councils to "regulate or prohibit" the keeping of exotic animals within the boundaries of any municipality in which it has been adopted. Notably, some of the animals on the long list of those deemed "prohibited" or "dangerous" include: big cats (lions, tigers, leopard, lynx, ocelot, serval); canidae (wolf, coyote, fox); non-human primate (lemurs, monkeys, apes); elephants, hippopotamus, camel, giraffe, zebra, tapir, rhinoceros, owls, hawks, eagles, harriers, osprey, common snapping turtle, crocodile, alligator, caiman, reticulated python, ball python, boa constrictor, yellow anaconda; and, venomous snakes and lizards.

Although under the template bylaw such animals would be banned, there would also be a "grandfather clause" allowing existing exotic animal owners within a municipality to keep the animals which they owned prior to the adoption of a bylaw. According to the template bylaw, an exotic animal can lose its grandfathered status if it is deemed to be: dangerous; potentially jeopardizing the health or safety of any individual; improperly or unsafely housed, enclosed or cared for; or, if the animal attacks a person or animal.

The issue of exotic animal ownership and the potential threats to public health and safety it brings first became a hot topic in Hastings Highlands last November, when news broke that big cat owners Mark and Tammy Drysdale planned to open a roadside zoo/safari experience business to showcase their lions, tigers and other animals. Although Hastings Highlands council did direct staff at their meeting on Nov. 18, 2020 to contact the County of Hastings to "obtain professional advice and support for a county-wide pathway forward, on the subject of exotic animals," the municipality has had little to say about their stance regarding exotic animal ownership and regulations. Briefly addressing the controversial issue in a recent email to Bancroft This Week,

CAO/treasurer David Stewart said "In terms of the County of Hastings exotic bylaw template, no representatives from Hastings Highlands were involved other than the Mayor [Vic Bodnar] in his capacity as a County of Hastings Councillor. Any information being considered by council on the subject of exotic animals will be available on the public meeting agendas.?"

Bancroft This Week contacted the Drysdales for comment regarding the county's Exotic Animal Bylaw template, however did not receive a response as of press time Tuesday.