

Hastings Highlands adopts strategic plan

By Bill Kilpatrick

On April 17, after close to two years of consultations, meetings, public input, and wordsmithing, Hastings Highlands has passed their strategic plan that will guide council and the municipality over the next three years. According to the staff report the process was initiated at the May 2023 meeting and has proceeded along multiple steps to arrive at the final product. The report outlined 10 such steps which included the hiring of Suzanne Gibson from Suzanne Gibson & Associates to assist staff with the process which began by reviewing all associated documents, past plans, budgets, relevant data, council reports, etcetera. The next major step was to design, implement, and review the information garnered from the strategic plan community survey which was completed in September and October of 2023 and presented to council that November. That same month, Gibson, along with members of the senior leadership team, met to plan for an all-day strategic plan meeting that occurred in January. The next step was to prepare a draft plan that was done in March and at which council gave feedback and suggested changes that were implemented and brought back to council for the April meeting. The strategic plan states that not only will it guide the municipality "into the future," but it will also "influence" the municipalities "decisions and actions." CAO David Stewart called the adoption of the strategic plan "an important milestone for council and administration" as it sets the goals and the actions that the municipality will take to achieve them. For Stewart, it is important that not only is there a plan in place, but that it actually will deliver results, "For example," wrote Stewart, "during its development we made sure to create the heading 'how we will make this happen' under each action item." This was an addition that Stewart feels makes this plan stand out from other municipal strategic plans, "This was intentional," explained Stewart, "and we did this to focus on delivering results for both council and the community." Highlights from the 2024-2027 strategic plan

The staff report begins by stating that, "Strategic planning is a powerful process of determining a municipality's long-term vision and goals, and developing the action plan for achieving those goals. It is also a good method for council and staff to communicate strategic priorities to stakeholders." The plan itself is broken into guiding principles and corporate virtues and contains four strategic priorities with specific actions and deliverables. The four priorities are as follows, "ensure financial stability, rationalize infrastructure, build our community," and "cultivate exceptional service and governance." The strategic plan states that to ensure financial stability the municipality's goals are to "maintain a competitive tax rate" and "examine and leverage their assets," and it will achieve this goal by taking the following actions: "continue to maintain and invest in a pay-as-you-go principle, expand non-tax revenue," and through the sale of municipal assets using the "love it or list it" strategy. According to the Municipal Finance Officers Association of Ontario the pay-as-you-go principle describes a method for paying for capital projects that involves, "capital costs being funded by taxation and/or user fees at the time that the capital acquisitions are made, in addition to the issuance of debt for the remaining unfunded amounts. The debt payments (principal and interest) will then form part of future operating budget expenditures. Pay-as-you-go is typically a more suitable strategy for shorter life and/or lower value assets. Using this approach on higher value assets could lead to the over utilization of debt financing, based on a municipality's available debt capacity." The municipality plans on achieving this goal by "preserving and increasing its reserves." The expansion of non-tax revenue will be realized, according to the plan, through grants, alternative revenue sources, and non-tax revenue sources such as administrative monetary penalty bylaws. Under "rationalize infrastructure" there are four goals: "maintain roads and bridges, improve building and facility maintenance, build the fire department's operational efficiency and reach, and safeguard the municipality's assets." In order to maintain roads and bridges the municipality plans on strategically investing in roads and bridges based on "data driven decisions," and they plan on creating and implementing a "funding and lobbying strategy for their portion of highway 62. In order to improve building and facility maintenance Hastings Highlands will "strategically invest in buildings and facilities," and "identify and review community space capital and facility needs," by "examining user fees and user agreements with respect to community centres and facilities." The main action item relating to the fire department is the "undertaking of a station structure review" that will be achieved by maintaining cost efficient operations, the completion of a fire service plan in 2024, and looking into different funding opportunities while advocating for legislative changes. In order to safeguard the municipality's assets the plan states that they will "regularly update and implement the municipal asset management plan," by reviewing the "future extraction viability" of the town's aggregate sites. To achieve the strategic priority of "building our community" the plan outlines four main goals: "support community involvement, enhance the quality of life, increase the profile and recognition of Hastings Highlands, and undertake waste management planning. The actions outlined in the plan involve the promotion of tourism and community engagement, building connectivity, bringing more amenities and services to the municipality, the implementation of the community safety and well being

plan among other goals. The plan further outlines two goals to 'cultivate exceptional service and governance,' and they are as follows: 'continually improve and maintain quality customer service,' and 'strengthen performance and accountability for results across the organization.' These goals contain multiple actionable items, including, but not limited to: 'investing and supporting employees, continual modernization of systems, integrating collected data and community feedback, among many others. Council was happy to have the plan completed and was looking forward to its implementation over the next term. Councillor Keith Buck, thanked staff for their hard work stating 'It's a good plan,' and, along with Councillor Nancy Matheson, stressed the importance of moving forward with the new plan. Deputy Mayor Tammy Davis echoed similar sentiments stating that she was happy to see some of council's recommendations in the final report adding, 'I look forward to seeing the benefit. I believe that maintaining the roads, the bridges, and Hwy 62 is a huge priority and successful lobbying to gain support for the repair and the resurfacing of 62 is our only option [as it is] a \$24 million cost.' Davis pointed out that much of the plan is already well underway including the 'fire department's operational efficiencies' and she hopes that it will 'continue to steer the municipality and council in the right direction.' CAO Stewart added in an email that the municipality and council 'would like to thank the community members who provided valuable feedback during this process, which was instrumental in helping set the plans, priorities, goals and actions.' He further added that, 'Our team is dedicated to operationalizing this plan in a meaningful way to deliver results for the community.'