

The price of making it personal

By Bill Kilpatrick

AT THE APRIL 9 meeting of Wollaston council it was looking like the Coe Hill Riders ATV Club would have little difficulty getting their 2019 land use agreement renewed with Wollaston Township. Members of the club had met with staff prior to the meeting to talk about the agreement and as a result of that meeting staff were recommending to council that the contract be renewed with an automatic yearly renewal and a 60-day opt out clause. The no-brainer aspect of this renewal was further reinforced at the meeting when council heard a presentation from members of the club who were also joined by members of the Ontario Federation of ATVs, including the membership and corporate affairs coordinator, Denise McLean and the executive director, Shari Black. During the presentation council heard how over the last five years the Coe Hill Riders have not only expertly maintained, mapped, signed and repaired 600 kilometres of trails including those that run through Wollaston, but they fixed bridges, insured the trail for \$15 million in liability, donated \$26,000 to local charities, brought in over \$90,000 worth of revenue to Wollaston in 2022, and council also heard how they do charity rides, garbage pick-up initiatives, and the list goes on and on. Most importantly, from a municipal perspective, they do this through volunteers at no cost to the municipality; who would, without the land use agreement, have to maintain the trail using tax dollars, that the Mayor of Wollaston, Michael Fuerth, estimates would equate to a one per cent increase in taxes. At the meeting the public works superintendent Kirk McCaw also pointed out all the money that the Coe Hill Riders save the municipality adding that they are quick to respond to fallen trees, that might take the public works department some time to address. Yet, when it came time to approve the land use agreement, members of council did not feel that this was evidence enough to approve the agreement, and instead made further requests like asking for the Coe Hill Riders financial statements and making the approval subject to public input. The reason for the financial requests, stated one councillor, was "due diligence." Now I'm all about due diligence, it's important, but in this case it appears that due diligence is a euphemism for bureaucratic stalling due to a personality conflict; and the result could be another one per cent hike in taxes for Wollaston residents. It's no secret that there are personality conflicts between members of the Coe Hill Riders and certain members of council, along with conflict between locals, cottagers, and trailer park owners, and given the evidence presented by the Coe Hill Riders, the recommendations by staff, the testimonials by staff, there does not appear to be any other explanation for not approving this agreement, and as I dug deeper this became more, not less, apparent. Talking with Black about the request for financials, she informed me that she is not aware of any other municipality ever requesting financials from any of the clubs that fall under her jurisdiction, which is close to them all. I thought, perhaps there were some financial red flags that happened over the last five years, such as a missed insurance payment or the trail falling into disrepair, that might justify such an ask? So, I sent some questions to the interim CAO, treasurer, and Mayor, regarding missed insurance payments, or concerns raised about the state of the trail, or any other financial indicators of risk. The answer from the Mayor to the first two was, "I have never heard of any concerns," but as for the financial indicators, he informed me that a not-for-profits financial statements are discussed at their annual general meeting. When I put the question about the financials to the executive director of the OFATV, Black assured me that the Coe Hill Riders are in good standing with OFATV, which includes their financials. Black added that the trails are impeccable and that the Coe Hill Riders trails are the envy of many clubs throughout Ontario. I also asked the Mayor if there were any complaints filed with the township over the last five years that might justify requiring public input prior to the agreement being signed and was again informed by him that he has, "never heard of any concerns." During the meeting the interim CAO also pointed out that the Coe Hill Riders save valuable staff time by dealing with trail inquires, and according to the staff report, "The club contacts the clerk and the public works superintendent if there are any changes to the trail. For example, the club closed the gates at the fairgrounds to prevent ATV riders from damaging the grounds when the spring thaw occurred. The township was made aware of this, and when the township received a complaint, the club dealt with it in a timely fashion." The requests and inquires by council, seemed to get even more bizarre, given the evidence before them. One member implied that the club needed to be more involved in volunteer activities in Wollaston, despite the fact that the presentation pointed out that the club is all volunteers, who do charity drives, garbage clean ups, fund raisers, trail maintenance, and more. Another councillor, who appeared to be cherry picking contentious issues from the agreement, argued that they did not agree with the spraying of herbicides on the trails. When the council member was informed that the club has never sprayed herbicides and reminded the member that the agreement says "spraying for noxious weeds as permitted by municipal by laws" to which the municipality has none, they continued to argue the point. Even after Black informed council that this is a standard clause and applies more to jurisdictions who have problems with wild parsnip along their trails, the member continued to grumble. Still another seemed

to be suggesting that the ATV club should pay for road repairs on roads that ATVs have driven on. All questions, that to my mind, were designed not to gain knowledge or understanding, but to try and place the ATV club in the worst light possible, by suggesting they adhere to unusual or impossible standards or requests. In her classic work *The March of Folly*, Barbara Tuchman, stated that 'Emotionalism is always a contributory source of folly,' and this observation is just as true now as when she wrote it in 1985. One of the hardest things to do as a councillor is to put personal feelings aside and judge a situation, person, or cause, not by your past experience but by their benefit to the municipality that you have sworn to serve. A simple test is to ask: 'who benefits?' from this decision? The people of Wollaston would certainly not benefit if this agreement is soured, but who knows, maybe I'm wrong and that's not what I was witnessing, but the evidence seems to suggest otherwise.