



## **REPORT**

**REPORT TO:** Mayor Bonnette and Members of Council

**REPORT FROM:** Chris Mills, Acting Chief Administrative Officer

**DATE:** April 23, 2021

**REPORT NO.:** ADMIN-2021-0023

**RE:** COVID-19 - One Year Review & Future Direction

### **RECOMMENDATION:**

THAT Report No. ADMIN-2021-0023 dated April 23, 2021 regarding COVID-19 – One Year Review & Future Direction be received;

AND FURTHER THAT staff report back to Council at key milestones related to the Town Hall Master Plan and the Future of Work.

### **BACKGROUND:**

This report has been prepared to update Town Council on the impacts of COVID-19 over the past year, the take-aways and the learnings that can be applied moving forward. Since the beginning of the pandemic, Town staff was quick to respond. Priorities included:

- Operational response
- Early and ongoing communications
- Business continuity
- Support for local businesses

Staff has demonstrated tremendous resiliency in their ability to pivot, learn and adopt new ways to deliver services and (in some areas) accommodate an exceptional volume of additional work to ensure a coordinated, timely and effective response to the pandemic. It should be noted that despite the impact of COVID-19, staff was still able to deliver on many of Council's priorities as outlined in the 2021 Budget and Business Plan and as such, this report supplements other information provided to Town Council. The changes implemented during COVID have also informed and modified the development of the Town Hall Master Plan and associated Future of Work initiative.

## COMMENTS:

### ***Operational Response & Impacts Regarding COVID-19***

In the early days of the pandemic, a number of critical decisions and actions took place in the span of just 8 days:

- March 17/20 - Emergency Control Group (ECG) convened its first meeting
- March 18/20 - Town Hall closed its doors to the public
- March 24/20 - Mayor declares an emergency to allow for certain actions and orders to be enacted under the *Emergency Management and Civil Protection Act*, as necessary, to safeguard the community.

The ECG was convened at the onset of the pandemic prior to any emergency declaration. Membership is comprised of members of the senior management team and key staff with roles deemed imperative to ensuring a coordinated and strategic pandemic response. The ECG met multiple times per week during the first wave of the pandemic to determine clear responsibilities, share information and prioritize issues. All decisions relative to staffing, working from home and facility management were based on a 'safety first' lens, recognizing that the health and welfare of both public and employees was the top priority.

Responding to the rapidly changing environment saw ECG Members liaise regularly with outside agencies, regional, provincial and federal groups to solicit and exchange information to ensure common understandings, share best practices and locally, ensure response measures (e.g. municipal closures) were aligned throughout the Halton communities. ECG members also participated on other committees internally and externally and continue to meet weekly.

In April 2020, the Emergency Support Group (ESG) was struck with the mandate to support the ECG by operationalizing decisions and ensuring the Town was responsive to the rapidly evolving state of the pandemic. The ESG was responsible for several key initiatives such as the development of the Recovery Plan, which outlined how departments would conduct business during the various stages of the pandemic, and the development of the Employee Handbook which detailed the steps the Town was taking to ensure staff's return to the workplace was as safe as possible. The ESG also managed the supply and distribution of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to those whose job required it and distributed 2- and 3-ply masks to all staff. Safety and directional signage and barriers were designed and installed, and an on-line screening software was implemented.

As the vaccine became available, a Vaccination Support Group was formed to assist and support the Region with the logistics of setting up a local vaccine clinic at the Gellert Community Centre.

## ***Human Resources***

The cancellation of recreation programs and school and facility closures resulted in 285 part time staff being put on the provincial government's Declared Emergency Leave (DEL) in April 2020. Added to that, the number of student and seasonal jobs available during the summer of 2020 was impacted. Recreation Services hired 14 children and youth program instructors (down from 80 in 2019) to facilitate the virtual summer camp and youth programs and 72 staff aquatics staff (down from 120 in 2019); Public Works cancelled their Parks student positions and reduced the number of Seasonal Parks workers from an anticipated 18 to 12. Following a directive of the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing in April 2020 to offer any job openings first to staff on DEL as appropriate, the Town was able to successfully re-employ 9 DEL staff to work in these Parks Seasonal positions.

The Town saw a record 16 full time staff retirements in 2020, up from an average of 3 per year over the prior 5 years. Exit interviews conducted found that many of those staff who retired had been eligible to retire for a few years and took the opportunity to do so during the pandemic.

Although the Town had to put part time staff on DEL as noted above, recruitment for full time positions continued, as previously budgeted positions and vacancies created by retirements were filled. A total of 44 full time positions were recruited in 2020, up from 33 in 2019, however this is to be expected with the high number of retirements that occurred.

Work pressures on staff at all levels of the corporation to manage a rapidly changing work environment brought about by the pandemic manifested itself in the amount of vacation carry-over staff accumulated by years end. 2020 saw a 35% increase in the number of vacation hours carried over into 2021, even with a vacation policy in place that asked staff to manage their vacation time.

Overtime hours, on the other hand, saw a slight decrease except in divisions such as Communications, Enforcement Services, Information Technology Services, Finance and Economic Development and Cultural Services that were directly impacted by pandemic response and reporting requirements and the switch to a work-from-home environment. Human Resources sent out frequent messages promoting self-care, mental health and ergonomics to staff to help them adjust to working from home and provide them information to help manage stress and anxiety levels during the pandemic. Human Resources sent out reminders and helpful resources from our Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP) provider and also provided information to staff on other community supports available, supported by either the region or province, should they need them. EFAP usage dropped by 50% as compared to 2109. Of note, workplace stress was only minimally reported in 2020 as compared to previous years. Human resources staff continue to monitor usage for trends.

## ***Communications***

Early and ongoing communication to the public is a critical component of any emergency response. Timely and transparent communications is integral to mitigate issues and support the Town's position as a trusted voice. At the same time, it was important to educate the community that at the local level, the pandemic response was led by Halton Region Public Health.

Communications has been extensive over the past year and Town staff utilized all its channels to deliver information daily via the website and social media as well as producing numerous e-newsletters and Town Hall presentations.

The Town's social media channels experienced tremendous growth as residents looked for information on Provincial direction and related impacts on municipal programs and services. Most notably was the level of engagement on the Town's Twitter channel which experienced a 90% increase in the number of people who liked, forwarded or commented on a post and a 20% increase in followers for a total of 6,812 by the end of March 2021.

As the pandemic response moved into the vaccination phase, it was critical that the Region was the communications lead with the Town responsible for amplifying messages and pushing out information.

From March 2020 to March 2021, external communications included: 11 Town Hall meetings with staff presentations; 27 editions of the corporate e-newsletter with a 40.5% increase in subscribers and 27 editions of the Economic Development e-newsletter and a 29.6% increase in subscribers.

Council briefing meetings were held bi-weekly for several months at the start of the pandemic and gradually tapered to a weekly occurrence. Written Council briefings were provided for several months and phased into an 'as-needed' document. Similarly, daily SMT meetings also tapered off to its regular weekly occurrence.

Communications to staff was also prioritized in part, due to many staff working remotely but also, recognizing the nature of the emergency and its impacts on employee well-being. Senior management recognized the need to keep staff feeling informed, supported and connected. Messages to staff focused on mental health, business continuity, legislative impacts, new protocols and service delivery models.

Several Town Halls were also held, providing staff the opportunity to connect and ask questions. From March 2020 to March 2021, internal communications included 105 messages to staff and 5 Town Halls. Additional information on communications is available in the report appendix.

## ***Business Continuity***

Since March 2020, business at the Town has continued throughout the cycle of restrictions and closures with the introduction of work from home accommodations, as well as the expansion of e-services, led by the Information Technology Services (ITS) division.

When the pandemic began, all staff who were able to work from home were asked to do so. Since March 2020, ITS have issued 122 additional laptops and 102 additional mobile phones to staff to support a remote work environment. Updating and enabling meeting and collaboration software throughout the Town supported the use of virtual meetings including Council meetings, public information sessions/open houses, and business meetings.

The upgrade of the Town's system architecture to Office 365, along with expanded internet bandwidth and VPN (Virtual Private Network) capacity were part of the foundational elements for a successful transition to virtual work. For many departments, the transition to working from home was possible upon receipt of necessary computer technology and training. Information Technology staff supported users at their home work stations through the use of remote connection tools to troubleshoot and resolve issues. IT also continued regular project support such as creating a customized site on the Shopify eStore website to manage the efficient sales and pick up of over 1000 Earth Day trees.

Service delivery to businesses and residents continued throughout the pandemic using an e-service platform for items such as permits and licences, launched when the new website went live in June 2020. The following numbers illustrate the high level of online services completed between June and December 2020:

- 629 burn permits
- 30 compliance memos
- 178 dog licences
- 87 enforcement requests
- 101 service requests

The Town's ability to pivot quickly was enabled by pre-planning the use of technology to support online transactions. Work in this area will continue as more services transition online including applications for building permits that will streamline the application process and help meet to public expectations. Implementation of the system is ongoing using a phased approach.

All departments quickly modified their service delivery to keep the core businesses of the Town operating. Some key highlights are noted below:

- Recreation and Parks: many impacts across several areas including new program delivery methods; enhanced community group supports; expanded park capacity; modifications to facilities for customer service and service excellence. Additional information is available in the report appendix.
- Human Resources: Recruitment of staff transitioned from an in-person to a virtual interview format; corporate training switched to an on-line forum and, where permission was granted by the provider, the session was recorded and posted for those who were not able to attend.
- Clerks: upgrades to technology in Council Chambers supported livestreaming of Council Meetings while members participated via Zoom; technology also supported full participation in hybrid meetings with some members and staff present in Council Chambers while others joined through electronic means.
- Enforcement: staff worked longer shifts to enforce Provincial legislation and provided required coverage to answer COVID calls along with HRPS. Officers had to re-adjust how they prioritized their investigations, no longer conducting internal inspections of dwelling units and putting COVID calls ahead of regulatory work, as the calls were received in real time.
- Planning: staff continued to receive development applications; respond to enquiries and advance planning projects and policy development through public engagement, holding meetings and participation in Regional processes. Additional information is available in the report appendix.
- Transportation and Public Works: minimal impacts to service delivery; adopting new technologies and procedures to support electronic plans review; reduced ActiVan vehicle capacities to maximize social distancing for riders. Additional information is available in the report appendix.
- Purchasing: RFP Consultant interviews switched to virtual format
- Climate Change and Asset Management: work plans remained on track as climate change steering committees and public engagement took advantage of virtual meetings to continue advancing Council's objectives as set out in its Climate Change Emergency Declaration.

- **Fire:** an on-line learning platform was utilized to train both full-time and part-time fire fighters through a single robust, secure and integrated system to create personalized learning environments; another system provided staff a life-like training environment where they could interact with specialty tools and brush up on skills with online tutorials.
- **Library:** introduced a number of virtual programs, adjusted processes and increased engagement with the public. Additional information is available in the report appendix.

The use of technology allowed the Town to continue its public engagement practices for numerous projects and ensured that business continued -- although delivered in a different way. The Town shifted to holding events such as open houses and public information centres virtually in March 2020. Attendance numbers have been good, and staff continues to refine the process. More information is available in Report ADMIN-2021-0019.

The Town's online engagement platform [letstalkhaltonhills.ca](http://letstalkhaltonhills.ca) continued to be well used, supporting community input and participation. An example of consultation enhancement is the approach adopted for the Roads 2021 portfolio; pre-pandemic in-person meetings would garner only a handful of residents. Moving the projects to the letstalk platform generated higher public engagement rates and created a two-way dialogue between residents and staff. The project input time was also extended; from one night of consultation at in-person open houses to 2 weeks/project on the engagement platform.

Roads Projects 2020		
Projects by street	# of PIC attendees	# visits Letstalkhaltonhills.ca
Pavement Management Part A & B & 5 SR	8	N/A
Young Street (Acton)	8	N/A
Fairy Lake Dam Rehabilitation - Acton	16	N/A
22 SR Phase 2 Reconstruction	18	N/A
Roads Projects 2021		
Bairstow, Credit, Eaton, 15 SR, Hepburn Cr., Morris St., Rexway Dr., Sinclair Ave., 22 SR	N/A	648
15 Side Road, 22 Side Road, Sinclair Ave.	N/A	79
Queen Street Reconstruction - Acton	N/A	61

## ***Supporting the Halton Hills Business Community***

Economic prosperity and the success of Halton Hills' businesses is key to the Town's ability to deliver the services that residents and businesses rely on. Since the onset of COVID-19, the Town has taken early, decisive and coordinated action to respond to the pandemic and to support the local business community.

- Over 25 new and modified initiatives were advanced and/or implemented by the Town in 2020.
- Cross-departmental/divisional collaboration, stakeholder engagement, advocacy and sustained effort were the hallmarks of implementing economic development initiatives during a challenging year.
- Business supports implemented by the Town in 2020, with many of these continuing into 2021, represent a considerable financial and staff resource investment, and will help position Halton Hills for economic recovery.

Additional information is noted in the 2020 Annual Report via MEM-ADMIN-2021-0006 that highlights various Town initiatives and accomplishments, with a focus on business supports provided by the Economic Development, Innovation and Culture division.

## **THE FUTURE OF WORK**

At the beginning of the pandemic, the Town was getting close to finishing the Town Hall Master Plan developed to accommodate future growth of the Town and support staffing needs to 2031. Preliminary estimates forecasted a growth of 56 employees or a 38% increase during this period. A number of building expansion options were developed and initial cost estimates for construction ranged from \$15.7 million to \$20 million depending on the configuration of the workspace. Additional parking would also need to be found to accommodate staff.

The sudden shift to remote working forced by the pandemic provided an opportunity to review the way we work and associated space needs. The Town Hall Master Plan was suspended, and the scope redefined.

The Town's response to the pandemic has illustrated that many staff can work effectively from home. Perhaps more importantly, are the results of two employee surveys that indicated strong support for working more from home if the option was available to them. A comparison of two of the survey questions from the early days of working remotely to today indicates that staff has adapted well and is positive about the changes that have occurred to date.



Survey Question	May 2020	March 2021
I would prefer to work more from home if that option was made available to me.	63.6% of respondents (145 staff) chose 'strongly agree or agree'.	75.4% of respondents (153 staff) chose 'strongly agree' or 'agree'.
I am able to be just as productive while working remotely when compared to my usual work location.	70.43% of respondents (163 staff) chose 'strongly agree' or 'agree'.	78.64% of respondents (162 staff) chose 'strongly agree' or 'agree'.

The surveys were part of the Future of Work initiative which is about how the Town is going to look, feel and operate in the future. The vision is to create a flexible, environment that can accommodate staff growth, support productivity and collaboration and provide a welcoming space for visitors. This initiative is intended to be a new foundation for the Town Hall Master Plan and save the municipality millions of dollars.

As an employer, (particularly given the current environment) the opportunity is now to re-think how we can best support employees' well-being, productivity, and Council's climate change direction towards achieving net zero emissions by 2030. As a municipality, we have an obligation to use tax dollars in the most efficient manner. To this end, the Future of Work initiative is timely; remote working provides a viable option against a large building expansion as had been discussed with the Town Hall Master Plan.

COVID-19 has forced many employees to work from home -- an approach that has been overwhelmingly successful in terms of staff adoption, productivity and output. Additionally, the reduction of staff commuting provides many benefits; both from an employee wellness and time perspective but also supports the Town's efforts to reduce single occupancy vehicles and the associated carbon emissions. Climate change staff estimate that remote working over the period of the pandemic has contributed to an overall Green House Gas (GHG) emission reduction of 39% associated with Town Hall operations when comparing 2019 to 2020. Going forward, it is estimated that if Town Hall staff commuting was reduced by 50%, this would reduce GHG associated with staff commuting by 24%.

In developing the Future of Work that will lead into the renewed Town Hall Master Plan, a mission and vision was developed and presented to staff:

*Vision: a work environment that is flexible and adaptive to staff needs and employee well-being while enabling productivity and high customer service standards.*

*Mission: create new, integrated and flexible workspaces that combined with technology enabled processes support divisional teamwork, collaboration, privacy and personal needs while accommodating current and future employees.*

The vision and mission will be used to guide the project but will also be used as a check-in for future decisions. As this project moves forward, Council will be kept informed at key milestones.

### ***Next Steps***

- Complete review and analysis of the staff survey
- Integrate survey responses into Town Hall Master Plan
- Meet and review with staff
- Develop return to work scenarios (timing unknown at this point)
- Construct demonstration project to illustrate how flex space can be used.

### **RELATIONSHIP TO STRATEGIC PLAN:**

This report addresses the Strategic Plan priority of 'Fiscal and Corporate Management'.

### **FINANCIAL IMPACT:**

There is no financial impact associated with the approval of this report. Financial impacts associated with both the Town Hall Master Plan and Future of Work will be brought forward in subsequent reports.

### **CONSULTATION:**

The Acting Commissioner of Corporate Services & Director of Human Resources, Commissioner of Recreation and Parks, Commissioner of Planning and Development, Commissioner of Transportation and Public Works, Commissioner of Fire Services & Fire Chief, Director of Communications, Director of Economic Development, Culture & Innovation were consulted on this report.

### **PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT:**

Not applicable.

**SUSTAINABILITY IMPLICATIONS:**

The Town is committed to implementing our Community Sustainability Strategy, Imagine Halton Hills. Doing so will lead to a higher quality of life.

The recommendation outlined in this report advances the Strategy's implementation.

This report supports the (choose one or more) pillar(s) of Sustainability and in summary the alignment of this report with the Community Sustainability Strategy is Excellent.

The concept of the Future of Work, upon execution would yield environmental benefits.

**COMMUNICATIONS:**

Not applicable.

**CONCLUSION:**

The Future of Work initiative seeks to build upon the lessons learned during the Town's pandemic response and leverage the experience and input of staff to create a new, hybrid-based system of working. The Future of Work is envisioned to be innovative and progressive offering numerous financial, environmental and personnel benefits. This information will be presented in a subsequent report later in 2021.

Reviewed and Approved by,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'C. Mills', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Chris Mills, Acting Chief Administrative Officer