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COW - March 13, 2023, Other

Office of The Mayor
The Corporation of
The Township of Brock
1 Cameron St. E., P.O. Box 10
Cannington, ON L0E 1E0
(705) 432-2355

Report on ROMA Conference January 22-24, 2023

The 2023 ROMA conference was held in person in Toronto from January 22 to 24th at the Sheridan Hotel. There were a record number of attendees which no doubt was partially the result of the recent elections. Brock Township Council was represented by myself, Regional Councillor Jubb, Ward 1 Councillor Frank, Ward 3 Councillor Canavan, and Ward 4 Councillor Pettingill. It was an excellent opportunity for all, especially new members of Council, to attend workshops and discussions about issues and experiences of rural municipalities in Ontario. It was also an excellent opportunity for members of Council to get to know one another better. It should be noted that at times during breaks, lunch, and dinner there may have been four members of Council present in one area. It was always "top of mind" that no discussions could take place that could be furthering the business of The Municipality given that a technical quorum could have been in place.

The following highlights the educational sessions/workshops attended by myself as well as material discussions I had with others during the event.

Asset Management for Bett Outcomes: Strengthening Council Decision-Making

The workshop dealt with the challenges municipalities face in implementing asset management. Discussions regarding how councils can better utilize asset management to support deliberations. The balancing of service delivery, risk management, and long-term financial sustainability

- Discussions were made about realizing value from what we have rather than adding to inventory of assets
- The Asset Management Plan must be a "living plan" which means it must be developed with change in mind
- The Asset Management Plan is a vital tool to manage expectations with residents. The plan must be detail driven. In Brock this would permit us to be fully transparent with residents on what The Township is planning to do with the millions in reserves and reserve funds. By making our plan not only transparent with the taxpayers but also "understandable" for them we can get "buy-in" from our residents which would help us during budgeting.
- There must be regular discussions between staff and Council regarding the plan both in terms of development of the plan and management of the plan going forward. There should be regular education sessions in open session on the what, how, and why of the plan. There must be regular updates as this is a living document. It is also recommended to keep plan updates and reports out of the consent agenda so that it is not simply received and "buried".

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- There are many training tools out there and many of them are free. They should be utilized for both Council and residents
- The AMP must be part of the strategic plan for the township
- A “readiness scale” should be utilized and tools are available via FCM
- Asset Management should be built into communications from The Township and it’s benefits to the community should be well communicated regularly
- Asset Management should be a key part of job descriptions in The Township and not just in the Treasurer’s role
- While many municipalities are building in “dedicated” property tax levies for infrastructure to deal with AMP issues there are few safeguards available to ensure these amounts actually go to, and stay with, asset management reserves. I put the question to AMO staff on whether they ever contemplated asking for better regulations from The Province to safeguard municipal funding. I suggested that perhaps “super majorities” could be required to divert funds away from AM dedicated reserves or change funding models within municipalities. While they felt it was a great idea and AMO supports asset management planning they do not support or advocate for additional regulations.
- There was no reconciliation offered from any panelists on how The Province appears suspicious of municipal reserves (we’re all too rich) and wants audits but meanwhile they legislate AMP onto municipalities which by definition requires reserve funding.
- Long term planning must be strategically tied to asset management and funding plans. This supports the idea of comprehensive and detailed long term capital and operating budgets. Since Brock is now funding all capital projects from reserves as part of it’s annual budget process it is imperative that long term operating budgets/forecasts be developed and updated to ensure that proper amounts of reserve funding is taking place and the impacts on the property tax rate can be forecasted years in advance.
- The entire process requires attention to accurate and reliable data
 - Inventory
 - Risk assessment
 - Proper templates and tools
 - Keeping the database clean
 - KISS (Keep It Simple Stupid) methodology
- Service levels must be tracked and targets developed. With targets developed a plan is then put in place to get there
- Natural Assets may be considered as part of the plan but this could add an entirely new “nightmare” to the process. Some municipalities have done it or are starting
- The retirement of assets MUST be part of the plan. Whether it’s a building, bridge, road, sidewalk, or other asset contained in the plan Councils must be ready to make the decision that part of the success in funding asset replacement will be the removal of assets. In Brock this may be a significant contemplation with the large inventory of bridges and buildings we have.
- One of the best ways to think of AMP in a very simplistic way is to make it personal. Everyone wishes to retire. Everyone needs to save in order to retire (whether that is through an RRSP or money coming off of your paycheque to a retirement plan). Without the money put away for retirement you simply will not be able to pay the bills or you will have to seriously cut back your personal “service levels” in order to make what you do have work. If you take money out of your retirement plan now (before you retire) you put yourself at risk down the road. If you commit yourself to ongoing costs into retirement then you will need more money saved in order to meet those commitments.

Data Driven Decision Making for Rural Ontario

This session discussed how data has and can continue to inform rural advocacy and advance the priorities of rural communities across the province.

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- There is a wealth of data out there and much of it is available to municipalities free of charge. Northern Policy Institute, Northern Ontario Data Consortium, Connect North, Rural Ontario Institute.
- Data needs to be brought into decisions by Council. While numbers can be seen as being “cold” they are important ways to measure ourselves, our successes, and our failures.
- Municipalities should use the data they have and the data that is available to development metrics and benchmarks for themselves. Have realistic goals for these metrics and come up with plans to meet them.
- Regular measurements to the metrics needs to be done and should be an important part of annual budgeting and long term forecasting
- Economic development projects rely heavily on data not only to achieve outcomes but to measure success or failure of a project. Admitting failure is not a bad thing when it’s learned from.
- Municipalities should develop easy to monitor dashboards where everyone including residents can monitor the health of their municipalities and Council and staff can determine if decisions are having the desired impact.
- The ethical use of data must be constantly monitored
- Partnerships should be sought between municipalities/regions, private sector, and non-profit sector
- Pillars of data strategy
 - Governance
 - Equity
 - Privacy
 - Standards
 - Capacity
- Municipalities must promote open data for public benefit
- Public access to reliable data can help a municipality develop service levels and expectations with residents. It can assist Council members in managing public expectations. It can assist in decision making – understanding how sacrifices in one metric may contribute improvements to another (or none at all).
- There is significant amounts of missing data on the non-profit sector
- Brock is a complicated municipalities. Many residents have service level expectations of larger centres while we have funding capacity of smaller centres. By implementing a dashboard and a series of metrics/KPIs we can better define our goals, communicate those goals to residents, implement plans to meet the goals, and measure our decisions against them.

Managing Risk in a Complex World: Municipalities, Insurance and Liability

This workshop discussed how municipal governments operate direct services for the benefit of residents, communities, and their local economies. When incidents happen, they can be exposed to significant risk and costs. The session explored why joint and several liability exists, municipal insurance options to smooth costs and the roles of risk management and data to protect municipalities and make the best decisions.

- Municipal insurance market is tight right now. Premiums are going up, coverage is going down, deductibles are going up, and liability is skyrocketing
- Restrictions to coverage is constantly changing due to municipal actions and external factors. Municipalities are getting into more risky programs and services.
- Cybersecurity is a big issue and insurance is disappearing. Currently for every one dollar in premiums received there is five dollars being paid out on claims
- The next “wave” of restrictions? Who knows. It will depend on where the next “wave” of claims is originated. Slip and fall claims used to be the big worry but new projects and services in municipalities is opening new “opportunities” for lawsuits.

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- Insurance pools are one of the biggest opportunities to manage risk. Brock is a member of an insurance pool
- Much of the discussion on insurance centred around US statistics
- One of the big municipal risk trends is “social inflation” which is the desire by courts and juries to “make the victim whole”. This usually results in very large awards and settlements.
- Social justice is changing many “norms” in society. There is an overwhelming desire to make up for historical injustices in the legal system
- The public perception is local government = deep pockets
- Growing areas of liability and risk
 - Cybersecurity
 - Sexual abuse and harassment
 - Law enforcement and corrections officers and departments
 - “animal rights”
 - Environmental impacts
 - Non-specialized services – municipalities getting into projects or services they know little about
 - Reactionary decision making by Councils – desire to meet public expectations without due consideration of the law or outcomes. Can result in LPAT hearings or lawsuits
 - Small town reality – big city ideas. Rural communities are trying to adopt procedures, services, and assets which are out of their ability to properly manage, operate, and support. Failures are resulting in lawsuits and significant premium increases
- The “new normal” of natural disasters must be considered in risk management. 1,000 year floods are now 100 year floods. 100 year floods are now 10 year floods. Increasing property values = increasing damage claims. What is the municipality’s obligations to safeguard it’s assets and its residents against climate change?
- Introduction of climate resiliency models and tools to help prepare for and mitigate climate issues.

Discussions with Canada Post

I had brief discussions with representatives from Canada Post. I described Brock Township’s problem in that we are a bit of a “media desert”. We have no radio station, no TV station, our one newspaper is very thin to say the least and some residents do not receive it regularly, local online news sites are shadows of their former selves. Social media as a communication tool works well for the people taking part but that is likely not a large percentage of our population.

They confirmed that many rural municipalities are experiencing this problem. Many have lost their local newspaper all together.

Brock Township, especially this term and this year, has much going on in which public participation and communication is vital. If people don’t know of a public meeting taking place they are likely not going to attend and we miss their input and consequently we get blamed for a lack of communicating the issues and events.

In speaking with Canada Post’s Manager of Government and Community Affairs they indicated that they can work with The Township to solve distribution problems locally. Some residents of Brock do not receive their mail from Brock post offices (some come from Woodville, Pefferlaw, etc). Canada Post can work to adjust delivery models so all residents can be served.

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It may be something that can be considered in Brock. Rather than us relying on a newspaper or website to push our message we may wish to explore the idea of direct delivery to households via Canada Post mailings. Printing of a regular newsletter or information package and then having it directly placed into the mailbox of residents could ensure that residents receive information. What the resident does with that information after it is delivered is up to them.

The need for communication cannot be underestimated. We have a core services review underway, a waterfront study, a recreation masterplan update, and more coming in the next twelve months alone. Communication must be improved and directly mailing to residents may be an alternative to consider.

Summary

While I would have liked to attend other workshops at ROMA there were time and scheduling constraints. Discussions with Council members and staff from other municipalities was extremely enlightening. ROMA and other conferences are not cheap and it is unfortunate that workshop details are not known before registration fees are paid. That being said I feel this conference was useful. It also served as a way for this new council to get to know one another better through shared professional development in workshops and seminars. I urge staff to thoroughly review the notes submitted by attending members of Council and engage further discussions on how the acquired knowledge can improve Brock Township and its operations.

Recommendations:

Move that this report be received for information by Council and that staff review its contents for possible action and further discussion and reporting.

Respectfully Submitted,

Walter Schummer

Mayor – Township of Brock