

?Apples to apples? comparison of policing options a ?big challenge? says local CAO

By Mike Baker

If there was one thing to take away from Monday night's policing services panel, which saw mayors from three different communities gather at Town Hall to discuss their experiences with the OPP, it's the fact that the municipality most comparable to Orangeville in terms of population found there would have been ?no true savings? had it transitioned to the provincial force.

Mayor Jason Baker of Brockville informed Orangeville Council about the decision his city made in 2017 following a nearly decade-long debate to reject a costing proposal put forth by the OPP.

?We found it very hard to have an apples- to-apples comparison until we asked for a very specific, made-in-Brockville costing. If we had been offered (the OPP's) base contract, I'm sure that would have been significantly less money, but we wanted to make sure the things that were important to our community were put into the costing,? said Mayor Baker (no relative of the writer). ?When the cost came back, with all of our enhancements included, it basically vindicated the local force for saying ?this is what it costs to deliver this level of policing service'.?

He continued, ?We actually found it would have been more costly to go with the OPP. The bid came in and we were quite surprised as we all made the assumption it would be less expensive. It came in more expensive because we asked for the enhancements, we wanted an apples-to-apples comparison. We had them place a bid for exactly the service we were currently receiving.?

Orangeville received a new costing from the OPP back in June. In her presentation to Council, Linda Davis, an OPP contract analyst, proposed an expense budget of approximately \$9.3 million in year one, which included all start-up costs, and around \$8.1 million for the next two years as part of a three-year transitional contract for the provincial force to take over policing services in the community. Ms. Davis noted the OPP would gather data over the course of that three-year contract, which would be used to develop a longer-term, Orangeville-specific contract with the town.

The question on a lot of people's minds on Monday was if Brockville could request a specific ?apples-to-apples? contract from the OPP in 2017, why didn't Orangeville ask for a similar thing when it reopened the policing debate in town in late 2018?

During a past OPP costing proposal, which Orangeville's previous council ultimately turned down in 2017, it was estimated the Town could stand to save in the region of \$4.3 million annually by disbanding the 155-year-old Orangeville Police Service. Thus far, through this most recent process, there have been no details provided regarding potential savings. It is expected that a consultant's report, to be tabled at a special Council meeting on Oct. 22, will address any potential savings the Town may realize by transitioning to the OPP.

Also in attendance on Monday was Pembroke Mayor Michael LeMay. Since his community disbanded its local police force in 2013, Mayor LeMay said the municipality was saving in the region of \$2 million per year.

Granted, the circumstances surrounding Pembroke's switch, Mr. LeMay noted, were slightly different to Orangeville's. The decision to request a costing from the OPP followed a lengthy and bitter contract negotiation between the town and its police service, which resulted in an arbitrator awarding civilian staff and uniformed members a new contract that would cost Pembroke an additional \$500,000 per year. On top of that, the town needed to build a new police station, while the leadership group at the local force, being the chief and deputy chief, had made it clear they both planned to retire by the end of 2013.

?At the end of the day, our decision came down to various costs. The treasury department did an excellent job on analysis and looking at what our costs would be in the long term,? Mr. LeMay stated. ?When we looked at it, we made the decision from a strictly financial view that it made sense to go with the OPP.?

In 2019, the City of Pembroke is slated to spend approximately \$4.91 million on its policing service through the OPP. Its final contract with the Pembroke Police Service, as outlined in the municipality's 2012 budget, was \$5.75 million.

The third individual on hand at Monday's meeting was Caledon Mayor Allan Thompson. While his community has been policed by the OPP for "as long as (he) can remember", unable then to provide comments or thoughts on any transition from a local police force, Mr. Thompson did provide feedback on the "excellent" service Caledon receives from the provincial force.

As well as the standard base service, Caledon also receives 27 different enhancements through its contract with the OPP. In 2019, the community is slated to pay \$12.1 million for the OPP to police its community. While that bottom line number is higher than the amount we pay here in Orangeville, when broken down, that amounts to roughly \$519 per property in Caledon. Here in Orangeville, based on the OPS' 2019 net budget of \$8.1 million, the cost per property in this community is around \$864 annually.

As Monday's meeting progressed, Orangeville Council had the opportunity to pose questions to Mr. Baker, Mr. LeMay and Mr. Thompson. Coun. Debbie Sherwood focused her attention on Mr. Baker, first asking if Brockville's police force had ever been subject to any police-related lawsuits or Police Act disciplinary hearings, a sore subject in Orangeville following costly legal proceedings in cases following the deaths of Heidi Ferguson and Adam Sprague, and secondly questioning whether the municipality had achieved the same results cost-wise by sticking with its local force than it would had it transitioned to the OPP.

"No, there haven't necessarily been any police-related lawsuits that I can recall. We have had some disciplinary actions amongst our members, which has caused (financial) problems due to substantial overtime costs," Mr. Baker stated. "Regarding the OPP contract, we didn't get a \$2 million savings. In fact, we didn't get any savings at all."

Coun. Todd Taylor asked both Mr. LeMay and Mr. Thompson about their experiences working alongside the OPP at their local police services board level. Of significant concern locally should Orangeville transition to a contract with the OPP is the perceived loss of control over the way policing is carried out across the community.

"That was one of my main concerns before we transitioned," Mr. LeMay admitted. "(As your own police force), the police services board is responsible for everything. I found our board was working extremely hard on a consistent basis because of legal issues. I was on the board when we hired a new chief and that process was taxing."

He added, "You're really buying in (to what the OPP can offer when transitioning). I'm not overly concerned with how things have gone. The OPP have highly qualified people. We do have input at the local level, but not as much as we had (when we had our own force). But, with that, the workload, responsibility and liability really decreases as well."

Another concern in Orangeville surrounds the level and quality of service the OPP would provide when compared to what the town is currently getting from OPS, particularly when it comes to community engagement. Coun. Grant Peters asked Mr. LeMay if Pembroke was satisfied with the service it has received from the OPP over the past six years.

"(Quality of service) has remained the same. It has not been an issue. We've been fortunate where if we recommend additional policing, for example if we want officers to patrol our main street during certain hours, we have not been charged (extra) for that. We've found the OPP changes their patterns and the way they do things. We have not seen extra charges when we've requested enhancements in certain areas," Mr. LeMay stated.

"Regarding community engagement, yes, that has stayed largely the same. The OPP has adapted (to our town) quite well. My main concern (before the switch) was what community policing would be like under OPP, but I have been more than satisfied," Mr. LeMay added.

Of the 29 officers employed by the Pembroke Police Service at the time of the transition, 27 were offered positions with the OPP. Of the two that did not, one decided to retire, while another was let go following legal proceedings.

With this being a brand new council in Orangeville, Coun. Taylor asked the three men, who accumulatively possess more than 30 years of municipal council experience, for advice as the municipality proceeds through this process.

"I doubt any of you are going to sleep well through this process. It's divisive. You can't win," Mr. Baker stated. "I'm assuming your community is very much like ours - half is looking at the numbers and half is cheering for your local police force. All you can do is put the information out there and collect it all."

He added, "It's a challenge in your budget like it was a challenge in our budget - that won't go away after you make whatever decision you're going to make. It's a matter of crafting forward how you want your community to be policed. I don't think there's any wrong answer. You have two extremely professional options on the table. It just comes down to what's most important for Orangeville."

More than ten questions were posed by members of the public, with the majority focusing on potential drawbacks and negatives surrounding the OPP policing model. Ann Tory asked about response times in Caledon and Pembroke, having experienced lengthy waits following 911 calls to Dufferin OPP. Both Mr. Thompson and Mr. LeMay noted response times were not an issue in their respective communities.

In what was more of a statement than a question, Jennifer Beauregard opined that Orangeville hasn't received a true apples to apples comparison through this costing process.

"I believe in some of our public conversation we've been trying to get an apples to apples comparison, but we've really been getting a very ambiguous apples to oranges comparison. I understand, a costing was by no means how OPP came to (police) Caledon, it was born out of necessity, so not exactly like Orangeville," Ms. Beauregard stated. "Pembroke, Mr. LeMay, could you tell me what your current population is?"

Mr. LeMay retorted that Pembroke's population, as of 2019, was approximately 14,500.

"Not exactly comparable to Orangeville considering we have almost double the population, still no apples. Brockville, whose population is most comparable to Orangeville, did not go with OPP as I understand, getting level of service that already existed came with significant cost in addition to original costing projection."

Local business owner Dennis Middlebrook tagged onto Ms. Beauregard's point, asking why Orangeville had invited Mayor Thompson and Mayor LeMay to Monday's gathering when, on the fact of it, it would appear the two communities share little in the way of similarities with Orangeville and the process we're currently going through in this community. He commented on Mayor Sandy Brown's refusal to invite Leamington Mayor Hilda Macdonald, who has been extremely vocal regarding the issues she has with the OPP, who carry out policing services in her community.

"What we're trying to achieve here tonight is for the public to have a chance ask the three mayors questions on those who have transferred to OPP, community who did not transfer to OPP, and Mayor Thompson agreed to come to represent a local community who has been policed by the OPP for many years," Orangeville CAO Ed Brennan retorted. "I think it's three different scenarios. To compare apples to apples, or find a municipality with the same geographical size, same number of policing, same geographical areas, it's a big challenge. What hoping to hear, and think they've done an excellent job thus far, is to provide more information to the public and council so council is engaged and understands of the important decision they're making and get all the information they can to make that decision."

Orangeville Council now has less than two months before it has to make a final decision over whether to accept a contract proposal from the OPP. A consultant's report will be presented to Council on Oct. 22, while members of the public are invited to provide their comments at a meeting on Oct. 28. Town staff will provide their thoughts and recommendations on Nov. 11, with Council to cast their vote on the issue by Dec. 9.