

Council made the correct call

By Mike Baker

Finally, it's all over.

No, that isn't a distasteful remark regarding the demise of the Orangeville Police Service. Rather, it's a tongue-in-cheek comment about the ridiculousness that has been the policing debate in Orangeville over the past four or five years.

Indeed, this issue predates my time here in Orangeville. Since arriving in the community a little more than three years ago, the absolute number one issue, amidst municipal, provincial and federal elections, all sorts of issues surrounding local health care, the opioid crisis, and our insane housing market, has been the future of community policing.

Following Monday's Council meeting, I repeat, it's all over.

After taking what they described as a 'deep dive' into the facts and figures of both OPS and the OPP, Council voted 6-1 in favour of disbanding the local force in favour of transitioning to the provincial policing model.

I've kept my thoughts to myself regarding this issue, pretty much for the past three years. During the previous costing, having joined the Citizen half way through the process, I didn't think it would be fair, nor appropriate for me to offer a half weighted opinion on an issue that means so much to so many. Now, having covered this most recent process from start to finish, I feel a little more confident letting you all know how I feel.

From a purely selfish point of view, I would have loved for Orangeville Council to stand behind OPS on Monday. I've maintained a fantastic relationship with Police Chief Wayne Kalinski, and many members of the local force since my arrival in 2016. Whenever I pick up the phone, there's always someone on the other end at OPS happy to help me out.

I've appreciated the presence OPS have throughout this community. Whether it is at Ribfest, the Blues and Jazz Festival, or practically any event in town. The chief, and often an officer or two, or ten, are ever-present, always happy to strike up a chat when the opportunity presents itself.

Finally, since I rent my current residence in town, the issue of crazy high taxes doesn't necessarily impact me as much as it would a homeowner. Hence, from a personal, completely selfish perspective, I'd be happy for the local tax base to keep paying what they are for OPS.

Lucky for you, the generic overtaxed area ratepayer, I don't sit on Orangeville Council. Instead, we have a team of extremely qualified, respected individuals leading the municipality forward. While there were people, most of them gathered within Town Hall, extremely unhappy and disappointed by Monday's vote, in truth, Council didn't really have a choice given the numbers that have been presented to them. A potential \$58 million in savings over the next 16 years speaks for itself.

It was clear the night of the 2018 municipal election that this policing issue would be coming back to Council for something of a re-do. It was the number one issue on Mayor Sandy Brown's platform. Every single member of Council spoke of fiscal responsibility in the lead-up to the election. This shouldn't have come as a surprise to anyone paying attention.

People will dispute the numbers until they are blue in the face. It's true, the projected savings are just that, projections. OPP has not, and will never stand behind any number presented to them by any municipality for costs and potential savings beyond the term of the three-year transitional contract. They can't. Just like any business, it would be extremely difficult for them to project costs years in the future based on information, or data, that has not yet been collected. Municipalities can do their best to estimate, but that's a different thing entirely.

When an organization you're seeking service from quotes a number, to most people, right or wrong, that becomes set in stone. OPP brass isn't silly enough to put itself into a situation like that. And you can't blame them.

When you look at communities currently policed by the OPP in Ontario, there are very few who pay more for policing services than we do here in Orangeville. It's projected that the community's policing costs will reduce by more than \$3 million annually from 2024. That's a tremendous number. In a community with a pretty significant infrastructure deficit and several big-ticket projects on the horizon, that sort of money can make a big difference. Even if it only ends up being half of that amount, it's still substantial.

Mayor Brown has said that if he forms part of Orangeville's next Council, he will be actively pushing for a tax decrease in Orangeville. The projected savings from transitioning to OPP will allow the municipality to do that with little, to no impact to its overall budget. This is, of course, if the projections are correct.

Six of the seven members of Council, as well as Orangeville CAO Ed Brennan are betting their political lives on it. Rest assured, should this go pear shaped, the mob will be out in full force, and justifiably so. Having spent thousands of hours amongst them delving into the numbers, and researching this issue, I trust that Council has gone over and above when weighing the risks of this move. At the end of the day, I trust their judgment on this issue, and believe the right decision was made. Maybe not the right decision for me, but the right decision for the town and its tax-drowned residents.