

Council to make decision on future of policing in Orangeville on June 12



By Mike Pickford

The immediate future of the Orangeville Police Service will be decided one way or the other on June 12 after Town Council vowed Monday (May 15) to make a final decision between OPS and the OPP.

Following several months filled with meetings, special sessions and public information nights, the municipality will decide whether or not it is in its best interests to disband a municipal policing system that has stood for well over 100 years, at its first public meeting in June.

Orangeville Mayor Jeremy Williams was anxious to put the issue to bed at last week's regular session, but was shut down by the rest of council. Now, after formally requesting that Town staff put forth its recommendations on May 29, it appears council is almost ready to make its decision.

There is a clear divide amongst Orangeville's elected representatives. There are those siding with the OPP, buying into the promise of significant savings under the provincial entity's new billing model, while others question the validity of some of the numbers that have been bandied about in recent months. Most notable of those is Mayor Williams who, immediately following Town Treasurer Marc Villeneuve's analysis of the OPP's costing proposal back on April 3, accused municipal staff of bias when it called the new billing model a 'game changer', claiming the Town could eventually stand to save as much as \$4.5 million per year by switching its policing services.

Numbers were once again the talk of the town on Monday as CAO Ed Brennan led a presentation that provided new saving estimates should the municipality side with the OPP on June 12.

The new magic number, according to Mr. Brennan, is approximately \$4.3 million per year. After compiling data provided by OPS Police Chief Wayne Kalinski and inputting it into the OPP's online tool - designed to help municipalities figure out what their policing costs would be following the conclusion of an obligatory three-year transitional contract - Mr. Brennan said he was confident the municipality would save money under the OPP's new billing system.

Using the data provided by the OPS, the OPP's online tool estimated that policing costs in Orangeville in 2021 would sit at \$5 million, a significant drop from the \$9.35 million the OPS is slated to charge. That \$4.3 million differential remains stable through to 2025, which could potentially lead to savings of just over \$22 million for the town over a five year period.

On hand to explain that billing system to council on Monday was Linda Davis, a contract analyst with the OPP. Since coming into effect on January 1, 2015 the new billing model has been successful in its attempts to create a 'more fair and balanced cost recovery system' according to Ms. Davis.

'The billing model is based on the rationale that all OPP policed municipalities should pay an equitable share for the provision of policing services, as outlined in the Police Services Act,' she said.

The model divides the majority of municipal policing costs into two categories - a base service cost that is allocated equally across all municipalities on an equal, per property basis and a calls for service cost, which charges municipalities individually based on their usage levels. Under this system, additional costs can be accumulated for such things as overtime, providing court security for municipalities with a court system, prisoner transportation and other enhancements.

Since the OPP is a provincial entity it does receive funding from Queen's Park. The OPP's policing budget for the year sits at almost

\$1.1 billion. The 323 municipalities that make use of OPP services will pay approximately \$400 million of that bill, with the province picking up the rest of the tab. It's that 65/35 percent split that has one particular member of council nervous.

"My main issue with this whole thing, besides the fact the OPP won't give us a set price for a service they'd like to provide, is that the provincial government, at any time can change the funding formula for policing across Ontario," Mayor Williams said. "I wouldn't have as much of a problem if the OPP came out and said this is how much they're going to charge, then, later, when the political winds have changed, make adjustments? But we're not seeing that. What we're seeing is the OPP saying 'just trust us', but they're not even really asking that. What they're really asking us to do is trust that Queen's Park won't meddle down the road." He added, "I can't buy into maybes and hypothetical numbers. We know what we're getting from the OPS right now and we know what we're going to get from the OPS moving forward so, for that reason, I'm going to be voting in favour of OPS."

Leading the charge for the municipality to make the switch to OPP is Coun. Scott Wilson, who told the Citizen late last month that he would be voting for the provincial service as it represents the "best opportunity the Town has had to cut taxes since (Wilson) has been involved in politics." During Monday's meeting, he gave his thoughts on the new numbers brought forth by Town staff.

"The question of whether or not there are savings by switching to the OPP has been put to bed. Now that we have stats and figures from the OPS and the formula from the OPP, we're able to calculate quite clearly (what our savings could be)," Coun. Wilson said. Coun. Sylvia Bradley echoed those sentiments.

"I think that we, as a community and as a Town should feel fairly confident that these numbers are now quite reliable. Of course, we can't say if they're 100 percent accurate, but we also can't say that the OPS can guarantee what their charges are going to be next year or the year after. All we can do as a council is work with the best information we have and use the best people we have (to help). I think we should have confidence in what has been presented this evening."

Members of the public would have their say before the evening was finished, with several stepping forward on both sides. Chief Kalinski was also in attendance to once again ask council to consider the ramifications of disbanding such a longstanding community policing system.

"My message is quite simple - the Orangeville Police Service has a proven track record when it comes to fiscal responsibility and providing a visible and proactive community policing service. We do not need an invitation to engage in our community, we do not need to be asked to go that extra step - we have a focused and dedicated staff base who do an excellent job in Orangeville," Chief Kalinski said.

He added, "Our citizens have confidence in the OPS. We hear it and see it time and time again. This is about keeping a local police service and keeping jobs in Orangeville. Our community deserves this. Disbanding the OPS will have a long lasting social and economic impact on the town. I ask that you consider that when making your decision."

In what could be perceived as an admission that the Town of Orangeville needs to look into saving money on its policing bill, Mayor Williams painted a picture for what he sees as the perfect solution down the road.

"The future, for me, is to see this region establish a Dufferin Police Force. We've cleaned house at OPS, OPS is a much leaner organization now and I think we're well suited and well positioned to contract out some of our surplus policing capacity to other areas," Mayor Williams said. "It would be an outward growth, we've already done a presentation in Amaranth? We would of course need to include council, but this is what I see as a more positive future for policing in Orangeville and Dufferin County. A customized police force for our community."