

SOUTHAMPTON RESIDENTS ASSOCIATION



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Most of the snow has gone but the ice in the lake is taking its own sweet time to disappear, so the winds off the lake can be a mite chilly. It also signals Town budgets and tax increases. Hoping for decreases due to growth and expansion is less likely to happen than hell freezing over. It has been a busy few months and there are a number of issues we all need to consider as summer approaches.

Property Taxes

The Town has passed the new tax or mil rates of 0.01215781 for 2009, including county and Education levees. The residential rate will drop by 5% but the average increase in the assessments for residences is 8.37%. According to the Town, this increase will amount to 3.63% on a house valued at \$175,000. Few houses in Southampton are valued at this level so your taxes will likely go up by more than this. You can do your own math. The total amount budgeted by the Town that has to come from taxes has risen by nearly 6%. The money the Town is planning to spend represents inflation of 3% and about 2.73% for growth. We also need to remember that the Town also makes us pay separately for water and sewerage treatment as well as garbage, the add user fees for arenas, rinks, swimming pool, etc and the total revenue keeps on rising. This increase is after the impact of development charges which generated over \$500,000 last year in the first full year. Wal-Mart paid \$208,408. The bottom line is that spending is running rampant and the number of proposed new projects is growing.

Wayne McDonald has written an excellent exposé of our escalating debt load. There is a trend on Council to approve a new project and say they will debenture it. This means they will go out and borrow the money to be repaid over 30 years or so. The debt is currently \$9 million but this doesn't as yet include the construction of the Port Elgin Medical Centre or the Public Library in Port Elgin, which will add another couple of million. The fact that Southampton used fund raising and donations to finance its Medical Centre but the Port Elgin one is paid for by the Town with no fund raising is another irritating issue. We now have the dubious honor of having the highest debt in the region. As with all government debt, we are putting off the cost on future generations. Some debt is acceptable but spiraling debt is deadly. Everyone should read Wayne's letter to the editor in the Shoreline Beacon (March 4th) and Saugeen Times (www.saugeentimes.com March 2nd Feature Article / Letter.

New Swimming Pool

The Town is in the final stages of approving a new swimming pool to replace the existing 30 year old plus pool at the High School. The Education Board has no money and a huge debt and so the Town is looking at what to do. After two consultants reports done at considerable cost, the project is projected at \$9 million and growing in cost and scope with talk of more lanes, indoor tracks, saunas and whirl pools. The wish list is ever growing! Wayne McDonald has pointed out that this project will nearly double our debt load with serious ramifications on tax increases. Norm Gurr and others have pointed out that the operating costs will also rise. They always do in a new facility, regardless of what is said. The Town is going to hire another consultant to project detailed capital cost and hopefully operating costs for several scenarios. This will become a political hot potato and even an election issue. We all need to become informed on the pros and cons.

Development

The Pharma Plus or Rexall development on HWY 21 has been approved. Diane Huber was vocal in requesting the Town negotiate for better vegetation barrier on Hwy 21 and also on getting the 21 ft high sign reduced more in line with Tim Horton's. We don't know the final outcome as it is in the Site Development plan the Town finalizes with the developer and the details are not easily extracted from them – they say it is confidential (rather like AIG bonuses). We are disappointed that the public expressed its concerns and preferences on the signage for Tim Horton's and one would expect the Town to recognize this and use it for subsequent buildings. Apparently they will have to be restrained by a more detailed, restrictive and enforceable by-law. It isn't possible to galvanize an effective process on every development to rectify shortcomings.

There are discussions on a new affordable housing project for 40 units in Port Elgin bounded by Wellington St, River Rd, Elgin St and the Rail Trail. This is the old CN property which is poorly used at the moment. There is a surprising demand for this type of housing with 140 names on the Town's list of requests for geared to income units. We sometimes forget that soaring housing prices hurt people on lower incomes and retirees more than the average person in the community. The Town is looking at donating this land and it would be developed by the County who are looking at selling eight houses to help finance the project. The development would prevent any future attempt to join the two separate parts of Market St and Council is still reviewing the alternatives.

Other Town of Saugeen Shore News

The Signage project covering standardized signage in the County grinds on. Two new entrance signs for Port Elgin and Southampton have basically been agreed to after input from many groups disliking the US designs. \$75,000 for these new street signs is in the budget and more planned for next year. When Money is tight, this seems like a discretionary expenditure that could be delayed.

As part of the Federal Government infrastructure campaign, \$750,000 has been committed to the renovation of the Southampton Docks. The Feds would like to turn the docks and harbor over to the Town who rightly say it must be brought up to scratch first.

The Town is planning to spend \$2,310,000 on the Port Elgin Wastewater Treatment Plant for better filtering and odor control. Federal money has been allocated also to this project. We were under the impression from the Official Plan process that there was enough capacity in the existing facilities to cover 20 years of growth. All these projects show that Development Charges should be much higher as the consultants report at the time indicated. The Concession 10 sewage pumping station and sewers is budgeted at \$6.5 million.

The new water intake line built last summer is in operation. There has been a marked improvement in the turbidity of the water pumped into the Water Treatment Plant. This is significant as the very fine sediment that causes turbidity also carries e-coli. The better quality has reduced operating cost, repair costs and reduced the amount of chlorine needed to get rid of e-coli and other bacteria. The project will be completed this spring and summer with the repair and reclamation of the beach torn up during construction.

The quantity of garbage picked up at curbside has been reduced by 25% since the introduction of the pay as you go system and the amount of recycled material has increased. It will be interesting to see if these figures are maintained over a full year.

Lake Huron Water Quality

As we reported earlier, the Province has changed its protocols for water testing in the Lake. The SRA had already been pushing for better coverage of the Southampton beaches and more regular testing. As a result of the Province's changes, the Grey Bruce Health Unit won't be testing the beaches in Saugeen Shores at all. We think this is a mistake as we need to know in advance of any water quality changes and have told the local councilors and the Town of our concerns but to no effect. They say that the incoming water quality feeding the Water Treatment Plant is good and we can rely on this as typical of the water closer to the shoreline. This is plain wrong, especially now as the water intake is 1200 meters off shore. Pollutants can come from the river and run close to shore. Also there is the unknown impact of bird dropping from cormorants and gulls on the Island. The Lake Huron Centre for Coastal Waters is also concerned on the reduction in testing when pollutant loads are increasing due to expanded farming and residential development.

If the Town instituted the Blue Flag Program as has been done in Sauble, the Health unit would be forced to do water testing on the beaches posted. People are concerned that closure of a beach for contamination problems would hurt tourism. However, beaches are only posted if two consecutive sets of sample readings exceed the limit. In our case, all five testing points would be averaged over two days and then action taken if this average is over the limit. You can argue that the beach should be closed if this happened before people get sick.. We should all remember that the current level of e-coli, nitrogen and phosphorous are well below the limits, not like the areas to our south where beaches are regularly closed due to pollution.

There is another committee working on Source Water Protection under the Conservation Authority. This will address the problem of contamination of water feeding drinking water sources. This has come about due to the Walkerton water catastrophe.. This could well result in better testing around water intakes such as the one here in Southampton. This is likely a way off yet.

Water levels in the upper Great Lakes have risen and are about a foot higher than last year. This has been helped by the above average precipitation throughout the catchment area of Superior, Huron and Michigan Lakes.

Around Town

The Red and White store on High St is being renovated and has been a hive of activity. Mary Ellen is planning to expand into organically raised produce and local food. The concept of promoting locally grown produce is being promoted by the Grey Bruce Agriculture & Culinary Association funded in part by the Provincial Government. This group has put out a Map and Guide showing all the local producers and their locations for those of you who want more information. We all like fresh, local produce and now there will be in effect a year round market to meet this need.

The Rail Trail Association is working on trails south of Port Elgin with the Parks and Trails Committee. More details can be found on their web site www.saugeenrailtrail.com.

The Ontario Heritage Trust recognizes individuals for their work to preserve and record the many facets of our heritage through the Heritage Community Recognition Program. John Weichel received the Lifetime Achievement Award for his extensive work in these areas. Audrey Underwood, Mike Sterling and Bob Treford are also being honored, as well as Kirk MacGregor as a Young Heritage Leader. Everyone will be pleased that their hard work and tremendous contributions are being recognized.

Fay Eggleston has sold Gerry's Fries to Michael and Deanne Bahen and the lease has been transferred to them by the Town. Hopefully the fries will taste the same!

The Board hopes you have a good spring and look forward to your continued interest and support. The issues raised in this letter will be discussed at the April Board of Directors meeting and we will report on the actions we are proposing in the next newsletter.

Tim Andersen for the SRA Board

March 23, 2009