



Subject: COVID Update – December 2021

To: Council

From: Chief Administrative Office

Report Number: 2021-318

Meeting Date: December 13, 2021

Recommendation:

That Chief Administrative Office Report 2021-318 be received.

Purpose:

This CAO generated report is provided as a follow up to the COVID-19 pandemic update that was provided to City Council on November 22, 2021.

Background:

The City's Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) was activated in response to the COVID-19 pandemic on March 13, 2020 by bringing together the City's Emergency Control Group (ECG). The COVID-19 pandemic continues to affect the nation and the City continues to prepare, respond, and plan recovery from the impacts of the pandemic to the municipality. As described in a previous staff report, the City's response is based on four principles:

- Maintaining essential City services to the community throughout the emergency;
- Continuing to ensure the safety and security of the public and City staff;
- Ensuring the organization remains financially stable throughout COVID-19; and
- Continuing to remain consistent in the City's actions with the actions of other agencies.

In order to respond appropriately to the impacts of the pandemic and adhere to these principles, the City's response has been divided into three phases:

- First phase – initial response and precautions for users and staff
- Second phase – maintaining essential services
- Third phase – recovery and reopening

Currently, the City is in the third phase, recovery and reopening, as staff continue to execute plans that were developed for reopening the City's programs, services, and facilities.

Discussion:

In the time since the last report to Council, there have been some developments in the City's COVID response as well as in the Province as a whole including the emergence of the Omicron variant and increasing case numbers in Ontario, the availability of vaccines for children aged 5 to 11, a new Letter of Instruction regarding the youth sports exemption, and the mandatory use of QR codes at the arena.

Cases in the Province

Daily COVID case numbers have increased to around 1,000 per day recently. This is an increase over periods in October and November when case numbers were often lower than 500 per day. In addition, a new COVID variant – the Omicron variant – has emerged. The Province is studying this variant to see how severe the symptoms are and how easily it is transmitted.

As Council is aware, the City recently increased public access to the City's administrative buildings and increased the number of employees working in these facilities. The number of daily cases and emergence of variants could impact the City's operations. City management and the ECG will continue to monitor the operating environment and make changes to the City's operating practices.

Youth vaccines

Since the last report to Council, the Federal Government has approved vaccines for children aged 5 to 11. Until this time, vaccines were only available to Canadians aged 12 and over. The City is actively working with Regional Public Health to offer vaccine clinics in Port Colborne to help administer the roll out of vaccine to children in this age group.

QR Code at VHWC

When Ontario introduced its vaccine passport system that required individuals to prove their vaccinated status when attending certain businesses and recreation facilities. This includes the Vale Health & Wellness Centre (VHWC). All users of the VHWC are required to provide proof of vaccination in order to enter the building and use the facility. In the course of administering this requirement, staff have received complaints that some vaccine certificates may have been fabricated to demonstrate that an unvaccinated person is vaccinated.

The use of fabricated vaccine certificates creates a safety concern for staff and facility users and the City is responsible for the safety of these users. In order to address this concern, staff have implemented a requirement for users to provide the Province's enhanced vaccine certificate which includes a QR code and is much more difficult to tamper with. Staff are actively working with facility users to make it easier to provide the enhanced certificate if they do not already have it in their possession.

The QR code requirement has been met with very good cooperation from most users of the facility. A small number of users have become belligerent and abusive toward staff and have been asked to leave the facility.

MOH Letter of Instruction

As mentioned above, a vaccine certificate is required to enter the VHWC. The Province has allowed for a Youth Sports Exemption which allows children aged 12 to 17 to enter without a vaccine certificate in order to participate in sports programs. The Region's Medical Officer of Health (MOH) is concerned about increasing transmission of COVID in facilities like the VHWC and, therefore, has issued a Letter of Instruction which requires additional measures to be instituted in facilities in Niagara, including the VHWC.

The instructions specifically require the following:

- In the absence of a general capacity limit, requiring that capacity in the highest risk areas of the facility are controlled to enable physical distance and reduce the spread of infection (deadline December 10)
- Requiring that all children age 12 and older show proof of vaccination to enter sport and recreational fitness facilities unless they have a valid medical exemption (deadline December 25)
- Requiring a vaccination policy for employees of these facilities (deadline December 25)

City staff have already undertaken action to ensure that the VHWC facility is fully compliant with these Public Health requirements by the required date.

Internal Consultations:

The City's Emergency Control Group continues to meet on a regular basis during the pandemic. From time to time, staff from other departments are present at these meetings to discuss reopening of City programs and amenities including recreation facilities and programming, cultural services, and access to City buildings.

Financial Implications:

While the pandemic has had financial impacts on the City in 2020 and 2021, there are no new financial impacts since the most recent report to Council. City staff project a balanced budget for 2021.

Public Engagement:

The City continues to provide high-quality communication to the community by giving frequent updates of City initiatives and sharing information from other agencies such as the Federal government, the Provincial government, and the Region of Niagara and Niagara Region Public Health.

Strategic Plan Alignment:

The initiative contained within this report supports the following pillar(s) of the strategic plan:

- Service and Simplicity - Quality and Innovative Delivery of Customer Services
 - Value: Financial Management to Achieve Financial Sustainability
 - People: Supporting and Investing in Human Capital
 - Governance: Communications, Engagement, and Decision-Making
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Conclusion:

The City's Emergency Control Group continues to meet during the pandemic to make operational decisions for the City's programs and services in order to maintain essential operations within the community. Staff will continue to report to Council for the duration of the pandemic.

Respectfully submitted,

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Report Approval:

All reports reviewed and approved by the Department Director and also the City Treasurer when relevant. Final review and approval by the Chief Administrative Officer.