



Subject: COVID Update – January 2021

To: Council

From: Chief Administrative Office

Report Number: 2021-26

Meeting Date: January 25, 2021

Recommendation:

That Chief Administrative Office Report 2021-26 be received for information.

Purpose:

This CAO generated report is provided as a follow up to the COVID-19 pandemic update that was provided to City Council on December 14, 2020.

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. The second wave of the pandemic has brought with it the Province's colour-coded recovery framework which moves the Niagara Region between different levels of reopening based on several criteria and the recent 'stay-at-home' order designed to contain the number of cases in communities in Ontario. Both of these initiatives combine to impact the speed with which the City reopens municipal programs and services to the community.

Discussion:

In the time since the last COVID Update to Council, the Province has announced that the Niagara Region would be moving into the 'red' level of the Province's COVID-19 recovery framework effective December 21. The red level is more restrictive than the 'orange' level that the Region was subject to prior to red. The restrictions under red govern the number of people that may gather in residences and municipal facilities such as community centres and indoor recreation facilities, as well as the operating hours and number of people that can gather in private businesses such as restaurants. The move to red was expected by staff. City Directors have prepared operating plans for all levels of the recovery framework and the plans for the red level were enacted on December 21. The main operating change that would be of interest to Council is that the Vale Health & Wellness Centre (VHWC) is closed to the public per the City's internal plans, including arena users, under red. The YMCA also suspended operations in the VHWC under the red level.

Several days later, the Provincial government announced that all of Ontario would be moved to the 'grey' or lockdown level – the most restrictive level of the framework – effective December 26. In Southern Ontario, the lockdown period was deemed to be at least 28 days. At this time, it was expected that the 28-day lockdown period would be followed by an additional lockdown period or a return to the red level (as opposed to a return to a less restrictive level) and the decision was made to remove one pad of ice from the VHWC. Staff determined that the cost of replacing a removed pad of ice is less than the amount that could be saved from operating refrigeration equipment during the lockdown and subsequent period.

After several weeks in the lockdown level, the Province announced a 'stay-at-home' order for all of Ontario effective January 14. The stay-at-home order provides a very restrictive list of reasons for Ontario residents to leave their homes, outside of the provided reasons, residents are expected to remain at home. Among other

communication initiatives, the Province made it clear that the expectation under the order is that any individuals who can work from home are expected to do so. The City is an essential employer and has many employees that cannot work remotely – these workers will continue to attend the workplace, while the City intends to comply with the intent of the order by ensuring that all other workers – those that can work remotely – will do so during the period of the order. At this time, staff decided to remove the second pad of ice at the VHWC for the same reason that the first pad was removed.

In addition to the impacts on the City as an employer, the varying levels of the framework and the stay-at-home order also have an impact on operations in the By-law Enforcement Division. The department receives many calls for service due to COVID including reports of violations of Provincial rules and calls for interpretations of the rules. Staff continue to respond to these requests in a timely manner.

Financial Implications:

The City is in the midst of year-end accounting for the 2020 fiscal year – a balanced budget is expected. The 2021 budget was prepared to allow the City the flexibility to continue to navigate through the duration of the pandemic while continuing to provide all municipal services without putting the City in a deficit position.

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.

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 approval is by the Chief Administrative Officer.