

Engage and Inform Committee
Meeting Minutes
Tuesday, October 10, 2023

Members Present: Councillor Valerie Durston, Mayor David Mayberry and Catherine White, Councillor Paul Buchner, Deb Riley and Jen Thomson

Staff Present: Nicole Chambers

Guests: Oxford MP, Arpan Khanna and Constituency Office Manager Jasmine Sullivan

Appointments

Mayor David Mayberry thanked Oxford MP Arpan Khanna for attending the meeting. He gave a brief introduction to the purpose of the committee – to engage the community so people feel like they are involved, and inform the community so they feel they can become engaged.

The Committee welcomed Arpan’s perspective as someone who is relatively new to Oxford County (the Mayberry family has lived on the same farm for over 170 years). David commented on the notoriety and rapport that Arpan has developed in the area, and noted that he seems to have an effective communication strategy thus far.

Arpan thanked David and the Committee for allowing him to participate in the meeting. He noted that Catherine White brought this Committee to his attention a few months ago when she shared the work the Committee does to inform and engage residents. Arpan expressed his full investment in Oxford County – he is making this known in parliament as well. He is working with community partners to build a strong team Oxford approach and his open-door policy enables him to readily act on constituents’ concerns.

Communication

Arpan noted that his communication strategy is a result of this area’s demographics. His office releases a quarterly newsletter with a postage-paid survey on the back. They are working on a monthly community mailer with events, and welcome advertising submissions from this Committee. Arpan is fairly active on Facebook, and is involved in different pages and groups – he noted that many people of all ages including seniors are present, and it has been the most effective social media platform to connect with people. He also creates videos on Facebook and YouTube so people can see and hear him speak. He also has committed to hosting pop-up clinics at the Livingston Centre in Tillsonburg once a month where he can assist with citizenship, immigration, CPP, passports, old age security, small business programs, and other CRA/Service Canada concerns. Arpan noted that getting out there and having a presence in the community has made the largest difference.

In response to David’s question regarding which communication strategies have the highest return on investment (with limited budget), Arpan noted that people-to-people meetings have the best return, with the second-highest being social media (videos).

Energy Conservation/GHG's

The Committee discussed the environmental initiatives that the Township has enacted, such as solar panels, energy audits, LED lighting, electric vehicles, etc. David noted that while we are not completely opposed to the carbon tax, we are looking for solutions to take these funds and invest them in programs that would help people conserve energy (insulation, heat pumps, electric vehicles, solar panels, etc.). The Committee questioned if Arpan would be supportive of this, or what options they are looking at in parliament?

Arpan noted that investing in green energy directly will have the greatest impact on reducing carbon emissions. He added that the carbon tax was initially brought in to try to force a change in behaviour by making traditional, carbon-producing items unaffordable. Arpan stated that the carbon tax dollars do not go to a general fund, they end up returning to taxpayers. The federal government has not seen a change in behaviour, and currently Canada is not meeting any targets (program has been in place for 8 years). Last week, the (independent) parliamentary budget officer estimated that this carbon tax will cost our farmers a billion dollars in the next few years. He noted the best solution is to invest in technology and innovation to make sure things are done properly. Arpan stated that the better option is to offer bonuses, rebates and incentives for reducing carbon. He stated that the farmland here possesses a challenge for rural areas as we are not able to build extensive transit infrastructure so we are required to commute. The infrastructure is also not in place for electric vehicles. Arpan stressed the need to reward innovation and invest in renewable energy sources instead of punishing Canadians for meeting their basic needs (heating their homes, gasoline to commute, etc.).

David noted that the cheapest energy is the energy that you do not use. If we are going to have a carbon tax, we should use the same money to help the people who paid that tax. Catherine White noted that regardless of incentives offered, many energy efficient upgrades are generally unattainable to many Canadians – these are the people who need these solutions the most. Jen Thomson added that the carbon tax punishes the lower class – again, they are the group that cannot afford items like electric vehicles. She also pointed out while electric vehicles may seem green, the recycling of batteries has not yet been proven to be environmentally friendly. David stated that the environment does not care where the carbon is coming from, what counts is how we can reduce it. The greatest return on investment would be to develop incentives for the lower income bracket. Arpan noted that their policy team is looking at what incentives make sense, bringing these back to the table will be a priority.

Two Billion Trees

The Committee has been following the federal two billion trees initiative and expressed concern with the progress made so far – only around 110 million trees have been planted. Council have written to the federal government expressing their concerns, and the response received was that the minimum they will support is 10,000 trees planted on 15-20 acres. Many people are willing to participate in this program that do not have enough land to enroll. Arpan asked for a copy of this correspondence to be provided to his office, and he will look into how we can make this program more practical.

Councillor Buchner added that the conservation authorities are largely responsible for efforts such as tree planting, and are struggling to maintain their programs and meet their budgets due to the provincial government cutbacks.

Housing

David stated that while we recognize that the Township is not directly involved in housing, we do have a SWOX Housing Opportunities Committee which looks at how we can get more affordable and attainable housing in the municipality. He noted that we have a few large employers in the Township which pay the \$25-27 per hour wage range. These employers are having difficulty finding employees that can afford to live in this community, or within a reasonable distance of it. We are looking to get more rental units and smaller homes built to attract this workforce. David stated that one of the challenges from Oxford County's perspective is that the federal government is not present in housing discussions – how can we increase the federal government's commitment to housing as it should be a shared federal/provincial/municipal responsibility? How can we partner with the federal government to get more affordable and attainable housing in Oxford?

Catherine stressed the importance of removing red tape to allow for housing to be built in rural areas which do not have municipal water and/or require septic systems. Municipalities should have help from the federal government to update their policies, including the Canadian Building Code.

Arpan acknowledged that there is currently not an easy solution to the current housing crisis. He stated that Tillsonburg has the third highest growth in Canada at around 18%, and Woodstock is the seventh highest in the country as well. He added that the lack of responsible growth creates problems – the existing population begins to resent development. Arpan is looking to connect with the Oxford County Mayors, Warden Marcus Ryan and Ernie Hardeman to discuss the proposed master plan for the area, as housing is something they can all agree on. He also noted that it is important to protect the farmland here as it is one of the best farming soils in all of Canada. Arpan added that when he met recently with Oxford County's CAO and members of the Human Services Department, he asked for a Q4 report which he can use to further push issues with the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing.

David stated that municipalities should maintain control over housing, but the federal government should be an equal funding partner, whether through the CMHC or separately. Arpan noted that different federal grants and programs are available for housing but they are not regularly taken advantage of – home building programs should actually build homes. He cannot commit to equal funding at this time but agreed that we cannot talk about affordable housing and have the CMHC and still say it is not a federal responsibility. They will try to find creative ways to work with all levels of government.

David further encouraged the updating of the Canadian Building Code to support energy efficient and smaller homes. Arpan acknowledged that there is a lot of red tape that we need to look at.

Mental Health and Addictions

David stated that there has been an increased sense of angst in the community which has been amplified by the pandemic. We are seeing this reflected in increased homelessness and cases of substance use and abuse. Mental health is grossly underfunded, this is another opportunity for a shared funding partnership with the federal, provincial and municipal governments.

Catherine highlighted the lack of funding for anywhere but Woodstock in Oxford County. She stated that it is impossible for low-income households or families without benefits to seek care for children's mental health, and many supports have gone out of business. More funding needs to be available to children – this is the route of many issues, as many children are struggling who do not have access to assistance, some are waiting up to 6 months for help.

Arpan noted that mental health is a very human concern as challenges can happen to everyone. He shared his experiences with requiring mental health support and he urges others to share their stories to remove stigma. He acknowledged that mental health is always underfunded, this is why he has asked an Order Paper question about how mental health funding was distributed. By Remembrance Day, we should have an answer regarding the funding provided and where it was distributed to, to get a better idea on the return for investment. Arpan shared his concern for the lack of crisis beds in Oxford County – which ultimately means that we cannot get people the support they need here. He stressed that we need to strengthen our communities, organizations, faith groups and families. People are under more pressure than they have ever been before. Jen and Catherine noted that inflation has had a dramatic effect on men's mental health, and their ability to provide for their families.

Beachville Rail Tracks

David wrapped up the discussion with a question regarding the CN Rail Track in Beachville – the crossing has been in a recent state of disrepair and residents are quite concerned. Arpan connected with CP last week and they spoke about upcoming regulations which will involve farmers paying \$350 per year for insurance to maintain their private crossing access. CP is happy to work with Oxford County to fix any rail tracks. Arpan was finally able to connect with CN as they were resistant to dialogue and had initially said it was Oxford County's problem. He has asked for a copy of their agreement to understand it better – Oxford County is willing to complete the work.

The Committee thanked Arpan and Jasmine Sullivan for attending the meeting. Staff will reach out to summarize the Committee's goals, accomplishments and upcoming events.

Arpan and Ms. Sullivan left the meeting at 2:05 p.m.

Catherine expressed her disappointment with the Committee not highlighting what we have done and why we are doing it versus ongoing community and federal issues.

Call Meeting to Order

The meeting was called to order at 2:09 p.m. by Chair Valerie Durston, and a quorum was present.

Approval of the Agenda

Resolution No. 1 Moved by David Mayberry
 Seconded by Paul Buchner

RESOLVED that the agenda for the October 10th, 2023 Engage & Inform committee meeting be approved, as amended.

DISPOSITION: Motion Carried

Approval of the Minutes

Resolution No. 2 Moved by Deb Riley
 Seconded by David Mayberry

RESOLVED that the regular minutes of the September 6th, 2023 Engage & Inform committee meeting be approved.

DISPOSITION: Motion Carried

Business Arising from the Minutes

Local Government Week 2023

Essay Writing Contest

Nicole Chambers provided the Committee with an update that the action items from the previous meeting have been completed. We have a few schools that are interested and expect a higher turnout this year. Submissions are due on Friday, October 20th.

Mock Council Meeting

A mock Council Meeting has been scheduled with the Oxford Reformed Christian School. It will be held at the school on October 24th starting at 12:30 p.m. All but two members of Council are able to attend. The school has been provided with an agenda and instructions to set up the tables. Julie Middleton has been in contact with them regarding next steps.

2024 Budget Survey - Results

The Committee reviewed the 2024 budget survey results which were presented to Oxford County Council. Nicole removed the sections concerning the other area municipalities, but a full report is available through the Oxford County website. David noted that this Committee should consider this report more for social versus budgetary comment. What are we hearing people say about the community that they are living in?

RESOLVED that the Township of South-West Oxford request that Council include the following in the draft 2024 Budget for Committee initiatives:

Engage and Inform Committee – Miscellaneous \$6,000
(to purchase pollinator garden seeds for Earth Day event in 2024, advertising and event expenses and the sharing cupboard initiative).

Transfer from Waste Management Reserves \$1,500
(to cover the reduced price of materials on Earth Day events – blue boxes, green cones, composters, rain barrels)

DISPOSITION: Motion Carried

Discussion Items

Standing Items

Review of SWOX 2030 Action Item List (minutes of August 12th, 2015 meeting)

1. Social Responsibility
2. Communication
3. Active Living
4. Safety & Security

New Business

Adjournment

Resolution No. 4 Moved by Catherine White
 Seconded by Paul Buchner

RESOLVED that there being no further business, the Engage and Inform Committee adjourn at 3:23 p.m.

DISPOSITON: Motion Carried