

King Township strives for efficiencies among staff

By Mark Pavilonis, Editor Local Journalism Initiative

The pandemic has laid waste to countless jobs, many of which will never return. Staff cuts and layoffs may be the easiest way for companies in the private sector to deal with revenue losses. But King Township has opted for efficiencies and redeploying staff, to create a much more productive administration. As staff and councillors went through their 2021 budget deliberations, a few things became abundantly clear: the pandemic changed the way the municipality does business. And it led to more than 80 identifiable process innovations. Mayor Steve Pellegrini said some municipalities have laid off staff, but King didn't want to go that route. At the outset of the pandemic last spring, King reacted very quickly, he said. Part-time and contract positions were scaled back. But layoffs don't make for a conducive atmosphere and employee morale, he pointed out. After discussions with staff and unions, everyone decided that employees would be reallocated. The mayor said some who were in the office actually got out and rode lawnmowers in the summer. While the municipal office may be closed to the public, it's business as usual. In fact, staff are busier than ever. During the transition, the Township "never missed a beat," according to the mayor. The mayor is confident that he can look every taxpayer in the eye and say Township staff are doing their jobs and no one is idle. In fact, demands have risen and residents are demanding even more services. King has responded with online services and ServiceKing staff is working hard to answer all concerns. The Township conducted a thorough review of all services, programs and staff levels across the organization in 2020 to fully understand the financial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on revenue, expenditures and service level requirements. As a result of that review several actions were taken. Job vacancies were not filled for most of 2020 and some vacancies still remain open as service levels do not warrant current hiring. This created additional workloads for current staff to continue delivering all services and respond to additional COVID-19-related challenges. Most recreational part-time, casual and contract staff were laid off in the early part of 2020 to reduce operating costs. A Redeployment Strategy was developed and staff were re-deployed where necessary to support other areas experiencing additional service delivery requirements. Facilities were closed to reduce operating expenses for staffing, cleaning, energy costs and maintenance to offset reduced programming revenue. Many remained closed through the partial re-opening in fall 2020. King realized significant operational savings from delaying hiring of many existing vacancies which offset the loss of revenues, primarily from cancelled recreational programs. As King's staffing levels are considerably lower than comparable municipalities in York Region, some existing permanent staff were also redeployed (26 in total) to support other areas with service level needs that were impacted by the hiring freeze and/or the decision to not contract additional staff. Planning is now under way for summer 2021 and it is expected that at minimum there will be a similar service level to 2020. As revenue shortfalls are unavoidable through the year it is anticipated that there will be significant redeployments again in 2021 to meet the service levels required. Despite all these challenges King Township has continued to deliver all essential and most non-essential services without increasing the Township portion of the 2021 tax bill. A summary of service level enhancements/initiatives that were introduced due to COVID-19 can be seen on King's website, www.king.ca