

King trying to meet bylaw enforcement challenges

By Mark Pavilons

Enforcing municipal bylaws is a challenge.

Residents may be quick to criticize the Township, but King has upped the ante in 2015.

The bottom line is bylaw enforcement costs the Township money and it comes with a hefty price tag.

In the 2015 budget, council approved allocating \$394,000 to bylaw enforcement, which is mainly staff salaries. They are looking at a Township vehicle and staff uniforms, to make the officers more visible.

Property standards, illegal uses and parking issues are just three of the areas bylaw officers address. Currently, King has three full-time bylaw enforcement officers, overseen by a deputy clerk who has bylaw experience.

Internal changes have increased efficiency and the number of officers who hit the streets. An annual report for 2014 on the departments activities is due out soon.

Unlike more urban areas, King doesn't have major issues with parking, simply because we have fewer restrictions. In some municipalities, parking tickets alone generate substantial revenue and make their bylaw departments self-sustaining.

The challenges in King include its vast geography, number of dedicated staff, lengthy prosecution periods and even the wording of each bylaw.

As a former solicitor, King CAO Susan Plamondon finds the court route for bylaw infractions to be "frustrating" to say the least. While prosecution can ultimately lead to compliance, provincial courts don't consider such things as priorities and sympathetic JPs may not levy sufficient sanctions. Without consistently strong penalties, violators will not be deterred.

Each case is different and officers have to size up each situation. Some assessments are subjective and there can be a fine line between "treasure" and "nuisance" when it comes to property standards and aesthetics.

Staff also have to appreciate the urban/rural differences in King and the impacts that infractions have on neighbours and neighbourhoods.

"One size does not fit all," Plamondon observed.

Staff are encouraged to work with property owner to solve the problems.

With more than 1,000 in-home businesses in King, the subject of illegal use is also a complex one. Home-based businesses are economic drivers so it becomes a bit of a catch-22.

King approaches enforcement on the basis of receiving complaints from the public. Officers are dispatched and they conduct an investigation, with the goal to force offenders to comply with the rules.

Prosecution is a tool in the Township's arsenal, but Plamondon believes that money invested locally in a business or a property is better than being spent at court.

The job of a bylaw officer can also be quite stressful at times. No one wants to see a bylaw officer at their door and they have to use their own strategies and people skills to do their jobs, sometimes meeting with anger and conflict.

Sometimes complaints from residents are the result of strained relationships between neighbours. And this can drain a lot of staff time and resources.

Plamondon said municipalities share information about bylaws and this can help in terms of consistency, when every municipality is on the same page with certain rules and regulations.

Recently, Councillor Cleve Mortelliti requested a staff report to come up with some figures relating to the costs associated with putting extra bylaw enforcement officers on duty after hours and on weekends.

While it's been an ongoing issue for years, Mortelliti said his request was driven by recent complaints from his ward residents.

The Township has never had full-time after hours bylaw enforcement which is typical of small rural municipalities.

"Residents who are asking for this must understand that this represents a level of service that has never existed previously. We do focus on certain areas on a complaint basis after hours or on weekends like noise or parking issues, etc. But this in no way represents true after-hours bylaw enforcement," Mortelliti said.

His request centres on asking staff to analyze the staffing level requirements and the costs associated as well as providing various options or methods of providing the service in a manner that is cost effective.

He's anxious to see what information staff come up with, have some public debate on the issue, and decide if this is a level of service the public wants to pay for.

Plamondon said they do currently address problem areas and staff are sometimes assigned to duties after regular office hours.

The staff report will see if it is a big problem and outline the potential solutions.