

Special Meeting of Regional Council | April 2, 2020

Remarks from Mayor Mike Savage

Good afternoon and welcome. This is virtual Council chamber, where I promise we will make real decisions.

I want to thank you for your willingness to adapt to this change, yet another in an unprecedented series of adjustments we and all residents of this community have made as we unite to fight the spread of COVID-19. Thank you to the folks who have worked with all Councillors to enable us to come to you today.

Before we move on to other business, I want to take a moment to thank Jacques Dube, our Emergency Operations lead Erica Fleck, and the senior leadership team that meets daily to discuss the ever-shifting issues.

My gratitude extends as well to all municipal staff who are managing to work from home, often juggling parenting responsibilities, and most especially to the frontline folks – including the municipal operations workers, emergency service providers and Halifax Transit operators and others.

In these uneasy times it takes commitment and a true sense of community to show up and do a job that helps others remain safely at home, or to help health care workers and other essential service employees get to work.

The public health response to COVID-19 requires deep emotional and economic sacrifices. I know all of us around this virtual table have heard from fearful residents, people who are lonely, workers who have lost their jobs and business owners that are close to folding or have closed.

I am grateful that we have been able to help some of the most vulnerable in our society by working with Community Services to turn municipal recreation facilities into shelters, and we have done our part to support needed closures of parks, playgrounds and outdoor recreation facilities.

As a municipality, as Council, we must find ways to keep money moving into our economy, to soften the financial blow to residents and business, to keep capital projects and stimulus dollars coming, to be nimble with private sector permits and keep procurement moving, while also prudently managing our own finances and making difficult decisions. I know we will rise to the occasion.

The CAO will speak to many of the operational decisions that have already been taken. He will also speak to revenue, budget considerations, and property tax

measures Council will be asked to consider as we look for ways to help people through this inevitable financial hardship. We will help those who need help; we will be a partner at this difficult time.

The implications for our community are great and still so unknown. Some days we must look hard for hope.

But, it's there...

In the capable crisis management of folks like Dr. Robert Strang,

The professionalism of doctors and nurses and all frontline healthcare workers, and other who ensure we can access food, medications and financial services.

The rapidly increasing volume of testing and vaccine research done right here.

Hope arrives in care packages and boxed meals for people in quarantine....

In virtual visits to grandparents and seniors in care;

In children's chalked messages on sidewalks;

Waves from neighbours;

Shout-outs to small businesses that have somehow pivoted to help the effort;

And from larger businesses who are paying forward their success through donations to the United Way's Atlantic Compassion Fund.

Our working relationships with the Province of Nova Scotia, the federal government the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, Big City Mayors and Nova Scotia Federation of Municipalities remains strong and agile. Politics takes a backseat to good public policy.

We are connecting weekly the newly-formed Nova Scotia Business and Labour Economic Coalition, organized by the Patrick Sullivan and his team at the Halifax Chamber of Commerce. We continue to engage with Ross Jefferson at Discover Halifax who has convened a similar tourism industry group.

You will also hear from today from Wendy Luther about how we can lean on the Halifax Partnership as we look to develop an economic recovery plan while continuing to build for Halifax's future growth and recapture some of our momentum.

I wish we could say when signs of normalcy will return, when we can once again spend real time with the friends and extended family, safely return to our workplaces and see our parks, playgrounds and playing fields bustling with activity.

The time seems long, I know, but it will continue to pass. We are moving through this crisis, apart and yet together, knowing that we are putting our collective social responsibility to save lives above all else.

I can't thank all of you enough.

Remarks from CAO Jacques Dubé

I'd like to start by thanking our amazing staff for working tirelessly over these past few weeks to adjust municipal services accordingly in an effort to keep our residents safe.

Changes in the municipality have been significant. But they have all been necessary in the fight against COVID-19.

All these efforts combined will help to flatten the curve and reduce the spread of the virus in our communities.

My confidence in our leadership team and their staff across all business units has never been higher. Words simply cannot express how proud I am to work alongside each of you in the face of this adverse, unpredictable and complicated situation.

I'd also like to thank our Mayor and each Councillor who has selflessly used their wide networks for the good of the community to promote important public health messages to our residents. This is a team effort and while there is still much work ahead of us, I'm confident that as a team, we can get through this challenging time together.

None of us have faced this type of health emergency in our lifetime. It's unprecedented. While we all have different ways of processing these challenges, it takes a toll on everyone.

Understanding that everyone is coping with their own stress and worry right now, on top of work pressures, makes me appreciate the efforts of municipal employees even more.

As I've expressed to our employees ... now more than ever, we must all do our very best to maintain a balance between work and life, and to prioritize our mental, physical and emotional health.

Each of us must meet our collective responsibility to support and care for one another. Check in on your neighbours and colleagues and ask for support when you need it.

We have made adjustments to almost all municipal services over the past couple of weeks.

Halifax Transit has been designated by the Province of Nova Scotia as an essential service under the current provincial state of emergency. Transit will continue to operate on an adjusted schedule with several changes to the service model including limiting passenger capacities, rear boarding and suspended fee collections all in an effort to help reduce the spread of COVID-19.

Parks and Recreation have closed all facilities, cancelled all programming, closed parks, playgrounds, sports fields, arenas and many municipal trails. These steps will stay in place until further notice.

In an effort to help healthcare workers and those who need access to healthcare, we have waived fees at all meters and monthly permit parking until further notice.

Customer Service Centres, Planning and Development permitting services, Public Libraries and most other face-to-face services have moved to a distance delivery model where possible.

We continue to post all service adjustments to our COVID-19 webpage at Halifax.ca/coronavirus and are regularly sharing this information on all of our social media channels.

Staff are continuing to review the impact of COVID-19 on the municipality's finances. We had originally been scheduled to approve the budget on March 24, after many weeks of budget debate and public consultation. The uncertainty of the duration of this pandemic means staff will be looking at a number of different scenarios.

Our budget is estimated at \$1 billion for 2020/21. A number of the measures that Council has taken to protect our staff and the public, as well as support

businesses, has resulted in a decrease to our revenue. Bus fares from Halifax Transit alone are around \$3 million per month. By adding forgone parking revenue and rent deferrals we are seeing material changes to the budget.

The plan is to revise the previously proposed budget as opposed to a full review, meaning there will be targeted reviews of areas such as vacancy management, the parking lot and program expenses as a result of closures.

Finance staff will be looking at both the operating and capital budget to see what can be delivered this year, and what can be deferred. We are also continuing to have conversations with the province about infrastructure spending and the possibility of stimulus programs.

The Mayor has said repeatedly that we will continue to pay our suppliers and keep capital work going wherever possible in order to support the economy.

It is anticipated that finance staff will be back with a recast budget in late May, but as with all things COVID-19 related, that timeline is subject to change.

A number of businesses have asked about deferring taxes. I can assure you that staff at the municipality, and across the province, are working on plan to assist not only in the short term, but over the long term. An event such as COVID-19 will ripple through the economy long after the pandemic is over.

Our objective is to establish a plan that will help businesses and individuals that have been impacted by COVID-19 in a meaningful way – to support their ability to remain viable in the longer term.

Today at Council there is a notice of motion that moves both the residential and commercial tax bill due date from April 30 to June 1. This is a short-term step that will ease some of the pressure businesses and individuals are facing.

Our objective is to come up with a repayment plan for taxes spread over the long term, so businesses remain viable and people remain in their homes. In order for this to be successful municipalities will need the help of the province.

CFO Jane Fraser and Councillor Mason are sitting members of a joint team established by the Nova Scotia Federation of Municipalities and the Association of Municipal Administrators of Nova Scotia. The goal of the team is to look at a province wide solution.

Both presidents of NSFM and AMANS have written to the Premier and the Ministers of Finance, Business and Housing and Municipal Affairs.

It is critical that those who can pay their taxes continue to do so. Tax revenue makes up 82% of the municipality's revenue. We spend approximately \$100 million per month and while we are financially sound we do require a significant amount of cashflow in order to provide services and keep capital work going for vendors and suppliers.

We continue to focus on delivering the highest level of municipal service that can be reasonably provided – while continuing to take steps that help minimize the spread of COVID-19. We're reminding residents that service levels will continue to be adjusted as necessary, based on available operational resources.

As a responsible employer we continue to assess our Human Resource levels and adjust accordingly. At this time, we have postponed many job competitions but continue to recruit for positions deemed necessary in the short-term.

While we don't know precisely when this pandemic will end, we anticipate current operations will function as they are now, until at least the end of June.

We will of course continue to monitor this very closely and update Regional Council and residents regularly as new information becomes available.

Thank you all again for your efforts in reducing the spread of COVID-19 and I'm glad we can all be here today to continue moving forward with important municipal business.

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