

Township demands retraction on Warden Emon's comments

Head, Clara and Maria council and residents upset over comments that made it appear township was shirking its responsibilities

By Debbi Christinck
Staff Writer

Stonecliffe -- The 250 residents of Head, Clara and Maria (HCM) Township are seeking a retraction of statements Renfrew County Warden Peter Emon made seemingly accusing the municipality of shirking its duty in failing to provide auto extrication on an isolated stretch of Highway 17 in the township.

And they want the issue to be discussed in the public forum.

The council of the smallest municipality in the county is not backing down from its stance on why it cannot provide auto-extrication services and is demanding a retraction from Renfrew County council for the warden's comments.

"Council and staff alike are dismayed and concerned with the irresponsible and incorrect information being voiced to the media by Warden Emon," the township council stated

in a recent letter to county council, as well as all county municipalities.

HCM Mayor Jim Gibson put it a bit more succinctly.

"Our name has been slandered all across the county," he told the *Leader*. "So we wanted to send this all across the county."

The lack of extrication services on Highway 17 in the township followed the dissolution of the North Renfrew Emergency Response Unit board last year. The township does not have a fire department and cannot provide extrication. Although part of the township is covered under an agreement with Mattawa, a 30-kilometre section of Highway 17 has no coverage. The issue sparked national interest in January following an accident where extrication was required.

In a press release from the township, council reiterated its position when the board was dissolved council did

investigate alternate service arrangements.

"Council believed that being a provincial asset, the province should assume responsibility where service could not be arranged," the release stated. "Further, they believed that since Laurentian Hills was in receipt of the equipment that a pay-for-service agreement might be brokered."

The press release states the township is in compliance with the Fire Prevention and Protection Act.

"With a total permanent population of under 250, an aging population and a geographic expanse of approximately 70 kilometres along the highway, even if gifted auto-extrication and/or fire equipment, HCM does not have the population to man it, paid or volunteer."

Council continues to maintain this is a provincial responsibility, but notes "although not legally its responsi-

bility, socially some HCM council members feel they must work to find a resolution to this situation and are investigating other options."

In carefully crafting a request for the retraction of the warden's comments, the council sent a letter, a copy of a newspaper article named in the letter, a resolution and the press release. The crux of the issue is council is unhappy with "the inappropriate and erroneous statements" made by the warden. An earlier draft, which was also circulated, went so far as to call the remarks defamatory, but the final version used the words "inaccurate and not helpful" instead.

The letter, which was sent to all municipalities last Tuesday, did not arrive at the County of Renfrew prior to the meeting of county council last Thursday. CAO Jim Hutton said it arrived after the meeting and would be forwarded to both Finance and Administration, as well as the Health Committee. Then it will most likely be part of the agenda for the March session of council.

One of the statements in the letter is this issue was not debated at county council and the warden is speaking on behalf of the county in his role. Mayor Gibson noted to the *Leader* while the issue was an information item at the county, it was never presented as part of a committee report or debated by council in general. The letter notes as warden the comments should reflect the views of county council after public debate.

"Warden Emon has not contacted HCM mayor, council or staff for accurate information concerning this situation," the letter states.

The issue has been widely reported

in the media and this was part of the impetus for the letter, especially a recent article in the *Ottawa Valley Business* online newsletter. There are specific areas of contention for the council surrounding the comments of Warden Emon, including the threat to go after HCM's insurance provider, and in his statement it is the responsibility of the township to cover that stretch of the trans-Canada. Council also objected to the statement "you can't fold up your tent and walk away", calling it a discourteous comment which portrays council and staff as being less than accountable.

Other statements by the warden are directly refuted. The first states there is no option to pass on the auto-extrication services to paramedics. To this, HCM council notes the Ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Services allows for one emergency service to take on the responsibilities of another in their absence, noting the priority would be the safety and well-being of victims.

Several Personal Injury Accidents on Highway

Another fact, which has been widely circulated in many media outlets, stating there are about 40 vehicles crashing each year on this stretch of highway, was also refuted. Using OPP data, HCM council pointed out there were between four and zero accidents annually on this corridor which resulted in personal injury.

"The average 1.8 annual incidents are reflective of the entire expanse of Highway 17 throughout the municipality and not only the under served 30 kilometres," the letter noted.

These accidents are the personal injuries accidents, Mayor Gibson

clarified to the *Leader*. Council did not state those are all the accidents on this corridor.

"What the data does not say is how often the extrication equipment was used," he added.

Although the township paid \$800 to the North Renfrew Emergency Response Board for coverage in the area, there was never a report on how many calls were made to this area, he said.

"There is no record of how many times they came in," he said.

Mayor Gibson said council decided to send the letter because they disagree so strongly with the comments made by Warden Emon.

"We want a legal proof of his opinion," he said. "He should back it up with a comment from the county's legal firm."

The perceived negative media portrayal of Head, Clara and Maria, as well as the comments of the warden have been very upsetting for the council, he noted.

"Some members of council were disappointed to see we were made to look like incompetents," he said. "Nothing could be further from the truth. We have done our homework and looked at this carefully."

Mayor Gibson said his council wants to move forward and find a solution.

"I had an offer of help from a fire chief in one municipality and that was appreciated," he said. "We want people to help us, not hinder us."

For now, council wants a retraction and for inaccurate statements to cease to be published or reported.

"I shudder looking at the errors that keep being passed on," the mayor said.



Comforting the little one

County of Renfrew Paramedic Lisa Recoskie carries a small boy from the wreckage of a car involved in a head-on collision on Bruce Street in Renfrew late Saturday afternoon to an ambulance. The little boy was one of three in the vehicle and luckily was not injured in the crash. The driver of the second vehicle was charged with impaired driving.



Within minutes of a head-on collision on Bruce Street near Renfrew Victoria Hospital Saturday afternoon, County of Renfrew Paramedics and police were on scene to attend to the injured. Three people were in the grey car and two were taken to hospital with non-life-threatening injuries. The driver of the blue car was charged with impaired driving.

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