

Mayor's Virtual Chamber Speech

Tuesday, December 8, 2020

9 am

Thank you, Melanie, and good morning everyone. This is very different from how we usually do our December state of the Town address but then again, 2020 has been a very unusual year; and it has not been a good one! In some way, each one of you here today, your loved ones at home or those still working in an office or outside – have been impacted by Covid-19. To those who have been personally affected or had a loved one fall ill or worse – my heart goes out to you.

Back in March, the municipality, like businesses has had to swiftly make changes. It was (and is) a new experience for all of us during this unprecedented time. No one signed up for this. There is no play book. The last pandemic of this magnitude was over 100 years ago.

One of the messages is that we wanted to ensure (as best possible) that it was 'business as usual'.

To accomplish this, our IT department secured and deployed laptops early on in the pandemic to keep staff connected and keep them working where possible.

We leveraged the use of our new website to encourage people to use online services whenever possible.

We adapted and continued to deliver some of our programs in a virtual way while others such as summer programs were cancelled.

We had difficult decisions to make and ended up laying off numerous P/T staff – from regular part-timers to students while we redeployed other staff to areas where they were needed most as new priorities arose.

The role of enforcement and education became increasingly important as we figured out new protocols to keep staff and the public safe.

We communicated daily with updates through our dedicated COVID-19 web page and special e-newsletter editions with information that the community needed to know.

On investhaltonhills.com, we tailored the information for the business community by developing an extensive resource of COVID-19 supports.

I know that in times of challenge, businesses must adapt in order to survive.

Many businesses pivoted their operations to meet local needs and demands particularly during the first 3 months of the pandemic when we were all just learning what this meant; what we could do and what precautions we needed to take to stay safe.

Superior Glove for example, began making hand sanitizer and face shields – certainly a different offering from their regular products. They also donated around 40,000 gloves to the Town for distribution to local family health units.

Vector is another company that produced and gave away approximately 200 face shields to protect front line workers. Thank you both for your generosity.

These are challenging times and it is important that we look after one another – both at home and in business. I know from speaking to many of you over the past several months that local business is feeling the impact; particularly those in the hospitality, retail or tourism industries.

The Provincial and Federal governments have rolled out many initiatives this past year to support businesses and I want you to know that the Town has worked hard to raise awareness of these opportunities.

We recognize that the success of our business community is key to the Town's ability to deliver services that our residents and businesses rely on each day.

Since the onset of COVID-19, the Town has taken early, decisive and coordinated action to support our business community. This work is ongoing and will continue for as long as necessary.

I would like to thank the Chamber of Commerce and our two BIAs for assisting the Town in responding to COVID-19. The Chamber and BIAs continue to be our partners in coordinating our COVID-19 response for the business community. They have been key partners on our Economic Support and Recovery Task Force.

The Town has implemented over 20 new or modified initiatives to help respond to immediate needs, support the local business community, as well as to help position Halton Hills for an economic recovery.

We conducted two surveys this year to hear from businesses as to what they needed, and I was very pleased to announce two new support programs that directly responded to what we heard.

The first was the launch of our Digital Main Street program. The Town received a grant to run this program which has enabled us to provide a suite of free digital resources and training to eligible businesses.

Responding directly to business needs, the main objective of Digital Main Street is to support businesses with their transition to e-commerce by strengthening their online presence. The program launched in mid-October and ends on December 14. I am pleased to say that it was very successful. We reached out to over 135 businesses and met with close to 80. What is great is that 6 were successful in their \$2500 grant applications through the Ontario Business Improvement Area Association. Several more are awaiting the review of their applications.

The second program is an example of the Town's ongoing support is our partnership with Ritual ONE.

Ritual ONE is an online platform that provides an easy way to accept commission-free digital orders. Businesses that sign-up receive ordering and marketing services for free until the end of 2020, so you still have three weeks to take advantage of this program.

The Town implemented many additional programs this year in response to COVID-19 such as the 'Al Fresco in the Hills' patio program which saw over a dozen restaurants participate in the first phase by expanding or adding their patios. We also implemented new supports and have more planned to assist the hard-hit arts and culture, and tourism sectors.

I also want to touch on some other business-related initiatives that the Town is working on.

The first is a new Business Concierge program which is expected to launch early next year. This program will provide an elevated customer service experience and fast-track the review of eligible strategic non-residential development projects.

The idea is to provide a formal service that offers simplified and time-sensitive development process facilitation; and rapid and coordinated issue resolution through a single point of contact – for these types of investments. We have been doing this for a long time. Now, it's about formalizing this approach and adding some key new elements.

This will build on the Town's prior successes in streamlining our processes and our 'open for business' approach. It will continue to position Halton Hills as a prime investment destination, creating local job, growing non-residential assessment, and enhancing our competitiveness.

You will hear more about this program next year.

Businesses or investments not meeting the requirements of the Business Concierge program will continue to receive support from the Town to ensure that they thrive in Halton Hills. Multiple supports and programs are in place for this.

Another new program I want to speak to, is the Corporate Calling and Business Retention Program.

Halton Hills is home to about 1,470 businesses. Many actually have their head office here. These businesses provide for over 23,000 local jobs. As much as 90% of new jobs come from existing businesses! Given these statistics, you can see why business retention is such an important initiative.

The goal of the program is to make nearly 500 direct local businesses connections over the next 12 months. Off course, these will build on the ongoing business community engagement that the Town carries out regularly, but in a more informal way.

The formal Corporate Calling program, will:

- Focus on key target sectors that align with the Town's emerging new Economic Development and Tourism Strategy;
- Highlight economic development as a 'go to resource' for business and investment inquiries & assistance;
- Connect businesses to resources, including those focused on COVID-19;
- Proactively support business expansion;

- Build and support Town ‘business champions’ that can help share the message of Halton Hills being a prime investment destination;
- Collect valuable data on business needs so that they can be best integrated into future Town initiatives, where appropriate; and
- Continue to work on reducing any potential barriers to economic growth.

Job growth, business expansion, issue remediation, continued improvement in the business climate and creation of ambassadors are all benefits of the program. Who knows – you may be one of the nearly 500 businesses to receive a call from our Economic Development staff.

Finally, you may recall hearing about the Town’s Foreign Direct Investment Strategy. This initiative seeks to attract net new investment and jobs from the international market. This will benefit our existing businesses, while adding new jobs and strengthening the overall economy.

A consultant was retained for this work which included performing a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis on Halton Hills and identifying specific benefits that our community has to offer investors.

We have a lot to offer. From our high quality of life, a strong business community, proximity to the GTA and international markets, especially the United States, Halton Hills is in a great position to attract investment.

The FDI Program is critical to staying competitive with our neighbouring municipalities and carving out our share of the foreign pie! It is an important component of our overall economic development approach.

It aligns with Federal and Provincial investment priorities, trade strengths, target markets, key sectors and policy directions. The Strategy will help us leverage untapped economic development potential.

Some of the goals of the FDI Strategy include:

- Enhancing and promoting Halton Hills' presence in the global market.
- Convincing potential international investors to locate in Halton Hills.
- Marketing the Town as the preferred location for investment in advanced manufacturing, agri-business, food processing and clean technology.

I'm looking forward to seeing work on this file progress in the years ahead. We are currently completing targeted Investment Business Cases to share with potential investors. Despite the challenges posed by COVID-19, international investments continue to flow – all be it at a slower rate. We need to be ready for the post-COVID-19 world to remain competitive.

I wanted to also briefly mention that we are nearing completion of our new 5-year Economic Development and Tourism Strategy.

The prior strategy was completed all the way back in 2012. Since then, as you know, many changes in demographics, technology and business conditions have taken place. These changes have had a compelling impact on local, regional, national and international economies.

Among other things, the strategy will:

- Maintain Halton Hills' economic competitiveness;
- Continue an "open for business" approach;
- Encourage local jobs;
- Maximize the economic benefits from the tourism sector; and
- Increase non-residential assessment.

You can learn more about any of the programs that I have mentioned at investhaltonhills.com.

The other item I wanted to speak to in this address is the Town's 2021 budget. This year's budget recognizes the impacts of the pandemic and the issues the Town faced over the past year in mitigating its' impact on the local community.

Our budget challenge has been to keep cash flow while managing new and unpredictable expenses such our insurance premiums; this year, for example, we had a \$311,000 increase hit.

The other challenge was seeing our development charges revenue reduced and low assessment growth.

We tightened our belts and trimmed over \$150K through efficiencies and savings.

We deferred various projects to preserve our cash flow so these projects will now need to get done in 2021.

This week the Town and the Region will be approving the 2021 Budget. The bottom line with the Region, School Board the overall budget will be a 2.4% increase. The Town portion is 3.9%. The budget is moderate, manageable and realistic.

The budget recognizes projects associated with health and safety, asset maintenance and plans and projects that advance the work of the municipality.

We are being careful to track all of our COVID-19-related expenses so that the municipality can readily apply for any provincial or federal monies.

COVID-19 has challenged the municipality to work in different ways, employ new technology and deliver programs where possible, in a virtual environment. I am very pleased with how staff has adapted and responded so quickly to serve our residents. They have issued 614 building permits plus 131 pool permits. We are getting business done. This is a significant increase from last year. Staff have done a great job getting business done.

As pandemic mitigation efforts are not anticipated to recede any time soon, the Town will continue to look at how supports and offerings can be delivered to the community. I am hearing from residents that they are looking for ways to improve their physical and mental well-being so you can expect enhanced access to places like Dominion Gardens and Gellert as an example.

You can also expect that work will continue on important files such as climate change. This year we made great advances and struck new committees – the Climate Change Task Force which I chair; the Climate Change Resilience Steering

Committee chaired by Councillor Clark Somerville and the Low Carbon Transition Committee chaired by Councillor Jane Fogal. If you don't believe in Climate Change think about the tornado in Georgetown in the middle of November.

Another initiative that the Town is undertaking is to advance work on the equity, diversity, inclusion and anti-racism file. I have personally met with local organizers – the Halton Hills Alliance for Social Change - they are the group who organized a peaceful march this summer in support of the Black Lives Matter movement. Staff are continuing these discussions as we determine a strategy for moving forward. Everyone should feel safe and included.

...and speaking of moving forward, as we look to the future, we can envision that 2021 will continue to be a year where zoom meetings are the norm...

...a future where we will continue to leverage technology to connect, learn, educate and engage...

...where people will socialize less in person but spend more time outdoors...

And finally, we envision that things will improve and there will be some light at the end of the tunnel. Vaccinations are starting to roll out by the end of this month when it was first estimated that they wouldn't be out until September 2021.

Like you, I'm hoping for a better year ahead. I would just like to control, alt & delete 2020. I'm hoping for a year that sees our community recover fiscally and businesses returning to their normal operations and revenues, a renewed sense of community pride and well-being for all.

I know from speaking to many of you over the past several months that local businesses are feeling the impact; particularly those in the hospitality and tourism industries. That is why more than ever it is important to shop local. The big box stores and the online retailers will do well. Remember it is the local businesses that sponsor local events, kids' teams and employs your friends and neighbours.

As the holiday season is here it is a time, for those that can, to give generously to local charities, food banks, etc. Every dollar donated stays in our Town and helps families get through this unprecedented time.

I want to take this time to thank all the front-line workers, essential workers, grocery store clerks, municipal workers and Halton Hills Hydro workers.

Now I know what it is like for pro athletes playing in an empty building. Giving a State of the Town speech in an empty room feels the same way! And, no turkey lunch!

Thank you everyone and stay safe!