

Hello Prince Edward County.

Around this time every year we usually gather in person to celebrate the arrival of a new year and reflect on the accomplishments of the previous 12 months. This year, COVID-19 will unfortunately keep us apart. The annual New Year's Levee will not happen this year as we had planned and as we had hoped.

But little has gone according to plan in 2020. When we gathered for the Levee last January 6th, we had no idea of the looming threat just beyond the horizon. Two months later, we faced a world turned upside down by this insidious virus. I am proud to say the people of Prince Edward County answered the call to keep others, and each other, safe. We stayed six feet apart; we wore masks; and we limited our travel.

Changing our way of life wasn't easy, and I recognize 2020 has taken a toll on many of you physically, emotionally, financially and spiritually. With that very much in mind, I want to seriously thank you for doing your part to limit the spread of COVID-19.

Despite the dire situation, I have been inspired by the response of the frontline workers in our community. Doctors, nurses, and other health-care professionals worked tirelessly under stressful circumstances in our hospitals and in our long-term care homes. Staff in grocery stores, pharmacies, restaurants and other stores kept us stocked up with essential items, all the while ensuring their stores were safe for all to enjoy. We, in turn, supported them by shopping locally. I have also taken solace during these dark times in the continued generosity and caring of the community. People delivered groceries to people who couldn't leave the house. Volunteer groups -- one of our community's greatest assets -- prepared meals for those in need or gave of themselves in other ways. And many others gave to worthy causes like our food banks and The County Foundation's COVID relief fund.

These are just a few of the examples of how this global crisis has brought out the best in us. As a municipality, we worked hard to respond to the pandemic. We strived to ensure the health, safety and well-being of the community while continuing to deliver services, often in new and innovative ways. We also managed to stay fiscally strong by focusing on the core services residents and businesses need most from us. That will remain a focus in 2021.

With the arrival of vaccine, there is finally light at the end of the tunnel, and I am hopeful we will start to move past the COVID-19 pandemic this year. But we still need to be vigilant in the coming months to stop the spread of COVID-19 as the vaccination program rolls out. If we can do that, I believe Prince Edward County is well positioned to bounce back quickly in 2021 and beyond.

A few of our key priorities in 2021 include adopting a Tourism Management Plan. Tourism is vital to our economy, and we want to ensure we are welcoming while also balancing the needs of residents who enjoy this rural lifestyle.

We will continue to invest in key infrastructure such as roads and bridges. For instance, in 2020, we undertook the largest road rehabilitation program we've ever done, with more coming as we move forward in our asset management plan in the new year.

The adoption of the long-awaited new Official Plan will ensure a more predictable planning process and better align our infrastructure with new development.

Part of that development must include affordable housing, one of council's key priorities. Our not-for-profit housing corporation and its new Executive Director, Chuck Dowdell, are working hard to locate and develop properties to enable young families to live and work in our community.

We will continue to support the redevelopment of the Prince Edward County Memorial Hospital. In October 2020, the province authorized the hospital to move to stage three of the redevelopment process. This is very welcome news for health care in our community. The County is also excited to start the multi-year redevelopment of our long-term care home. We are committed to transforming H.J. McFarland Memorial into a modern facility where we can care for more seniors in our community.

We're also going to improve broadband access, which is vital in this new world where more and more people are working and learning from home. Doing so will keep the County an attractive place to live, work, play, and learn.

We are going to support the most vulnerable people in our community, those hit hardest by the pandemic. We will do this by supporting food security initiatives and expanding affordable housing, and continuing to support not-for-profit organizations and The County Foundation.

We will foster a more inclusive community and keep building a renewed relationship with our neighbours, the Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte.

And we will continue to modernize the municipality by offering more services online and improving how we deliver services the community values such as roads, parks, and waste collection.

2021 promises to be another challenging yet promising year for Prince Edward County. Council and staff remain committed to working hard for the residents and businesses in the County, as do our MPP, Todd Smith, and our MP, Neil Ellis, our representatives in the provincial and federal governments. And we will continue to work with our neighbouring municipalities and their leaders and staff to ensure our region remains a strong, viable area for economic investment.

I want to wish everyone in Prince Edward County a happy and healthy new year. I hope next January we will be able to meet again, but at that time in person. Thank you and all the best in 2021.