

Thank you, Leo, for the kind introduction.

And thank you, Rob for the invitation received last October, seemingly an eternity ago!

Good morning everyone.

Well, wasn't 2020 something of a year!

When I spoke to you last January 14 one of our looming concerns was what Mother Nature would throw at Prince Edward County - and the Quinte Region - in the form of rising water levels in Lake Ontario.

Instead, in March, she tossed us all a curve ball in the form of COVID-19.

A game changer if ever we saw one!

Back in March, there was no way to anticipate that words and phrases such as "pandemic", "contagion", "masks mandatory", "case count", "hand sanitizer", "lockdown/shutdown" and "social distancing", among many others, would become part of the lexicon that has guided our lives for the past nine months.

Over the course of the pandemic, all of us who serve our County ratepayers – our staff members, and those of us serving as elected representatives - have had to deal with the very complicated emotions of our residents and businesses, and those of each other: anger, frustration, claustrophobia, worry, loneliness, and insecurity all come to mind.

Changing our way of life wasn't easy, and I recognize 2020 has taken a toll on many people physically, emotionally, financially and spiritually.

I get it: Many of you may have been asking yourselves how your job and income would be affected; how your business would survive a lockdown; how you would pay your bills.

Others were concerned about juggling the challenges of working from home while simultaneously dealing with home or virtual schooling.

And all of us felt the effects of absences in our lives, particularly during Christmas and New Years – the gathering of friends, family and neighbours; attending parties and celebrations; or just ‘hangin’ with your buds’.

2020 was an extraordinary year during which normal routines and ways of life were coopted in a manner we never expected or thought possible.

But we have responded well as evidenced by the very low case count in The County: We stayed six feet apart, we wore masks, we limited our travel, we used untold gallons of hand sanitizer.

And we helped our businesses stay in business by shopping locally.

But as surreal as dealing with the pandemic was, and as awkward as it was to work within the restrictions of guidelines provided from our provincial government or Hastings Prince Edward Public Health, we still had work to do and a municipality to manage and run.

And notwithstanding COVID-19, we accomplished a fair bit in 2020:

- As a municipality, we worked extraordinarily hard to respond to the pandemic, ensuring the health, safety, and well-being of the community while at the same time continuing to deliver services, often in new and innovative ways.
- This included such things as deferring taxes and forgiving interest on overdue payments; and making more services available online

- We managed to stay fiscally strong by focusing on the core services that residents and businesses need from the municipality. And we did that without laying off staff, which is important as the municipality is a major employer in the community. Redeployment of staff was particularly effective in 2020.
- To that end, we undertook the largest road rehabilitation program we've ever done, with \$2.4 million committed for rural road treatment in 2021, and more coming as we move forward in our asset management this year.
- We were a leader in limiting the spread of the coronavirus by being one of the first municipalities to adopt a mask by-law and declaring a state of emergency early on, and keeping the declaration in place in recognition of the high probability of the second wave of the virus that we are now encountering.

There were some other accomplishments in 2020:

- We passed the 2021 budget and kept the increase to 3.17% or 1.47% after growth assessment.
- Building permit and construction activity continued regardless of supply chain and employment challenges brought on by the pandemic, although it was slightly lower than 2019 (889 versus 836)
- Council approved the Picton Branch library expansion
- And Council DID NOT approve Picton Terminals rezoning application, now going to appeal.

So, with that brief recap of a year without precedence, where do we go from here?

With the arrival of a vaccine – be it Pfizer, Moderna or Astra Zenica - there is hope that we can move past the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021.

We still need to be vigilant in the coming months to stop the further spread before widespread vaccination can occur.

We also have to be mindful of “variants” and “mutations” of coronavirus that could have a profound effect if we let our guard down. If we continue to play by the new rules, we will set the County up to bounce back quickly in 2021.

We are going to do this in several ways. Let me explain a few.

The summer of 2020 was unlike any other I have experienced inasmuch as The County was seemingly overrun with visitors attracted by our many various attractions, including Sandbanks. We were also the victim of federal and provincial legislation that closed the borders to travel internationally or interprovincially; of staged reopenings that compelled people to travel to rural areas such as ours to take advantage of what was allowed to be open such as our restaurants and outdoor amenities; the closure of recreational facilities in large urban centres such as the GTA; and the general frustration of many people to just being “cooped up” for so long.

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.

In the late summer last year, I put forward a motion for staff to develop a Tourism Management Plan. Later this month the plan will come to council for consideration and hopefully adoption.

Part of any Tourism Management Plan must consider Sandbanks, Lake on the Mountain and North Beach Provincial Parks. Minister Yurek committed to changes to the parks’ operations and our staff have been working with his staff to ensure our plans integrate seamlessly.

Further, we will continue to pursue additional visitor revenue streams through a gate levy at the provincial parks, recently discussed with MPP Todd Smith and MPP Jeff Yurek, and through the introduction of a Municipal Accommodation Tax that becomes effective next month.

The pandemic has amplified the need to ensure a more predictable planning process and better aligning our infrastructure with new development through approval of the long-awaited new Official Plan.

This is an important step, particularly given The County's increased popularity as a result of the pandemic.

The ability or even the requirement for people to work from home has motivated many to make that home here, in The County.

Several housing developments are in various stages of approval or construction in our settlement areas, all of which require infrastructure investment. Given the popularity of The County, our approach of getting developers to assist with financing that investment is meeting with little resistance.

In 2021 we will begin the multi-year process of redeveloping H.J. McFarland Memorial Home so that we can care for more seniors in our community and ensure we have a modern facility that is positioned to respond to the next health emergency.

As you may recall, Minister Fullerton visited the home last February and announced the approval of the addition of more beds to HJM. We're certainly grateful to the Minister for recognizing and acting on our needs.

While on HJM, a welcome addition to the municipality is HJM's new Executive Director, Kyle Cotton, who arrived a week or so before the pandemic began, and then had to lock it down to protect the residents

and staff. To his credit, and to that of the staff, there have been no COVID outbreaks at HJM.

The County continues to support the redevelopment of the Prince Edward County Memorial Hospital.

In October 2020, the province authorized PECMH to move to stage three of the redevelopment process. This was very welcome news for health care in our community.

Recently, the municipality delivered a \$2.3-million-dollar gift installment, which is part of the municipality's \$4.5-million-dollar pledge to the hospital.

I have been encouraged to see the Rotary Club of Picton and so many other community groups "Back the Build."

Thank you for your support and please keep up the great work.

Together, we will help deliver a new hospital that will benefit our community for generations to come.

Given what we have seen with increased visitors and people wishing to make The County their home, improving broadband access is vital in this new world of people working and learning more from home. Better broadband and connectivity will keep the County an attractive place to live, work and play.

I have been working with our neighbouring municipalities in the Eastern Ontario Warden's Caucus and the Eastern Ontario Mayor's Caucus to press the federal and provincial governments to increase and approve funding for this critical investment.

In addition, we are working with Internet Service Providers to increase their coverage in the municipality.

This year, we are going to continue to be there for the most vulnerable people in our community, those hit hardest by the pandemic, making sure they don't fall through the cracks.

A big part of that must include affordable housing, one of council's key priorities.

Developing more affordable and attainable housing is vital for the long-term health of our community.

The impact of rising house prices and lack of rental units is very far-reaching.

Employees can't afford to live here.

Young people and seniors are forced to leave our community and seek housing elsewhere.

And our community cohesion is undermined, especially as more and more of our housing stock is converted to short-term accommodations.

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.

Among those properties is the old arena property in Wellington that the municipality sold to the housing corporation last fall. Chuck expects to make an announcement as to next steps for this property in the next couple of weeks.

We also continue discussion with the Ministry of Education, the Hastings Prince Edward District School Board and the Catholic School Board concerning the Queen Elizabeth School property that I spoke to you about last January.

I have continued to press with all three that the QE site is vitally important to the community for the development of affordable housing.

Although the pandemic has had some effect on these discussions, I am optimistic we can get this matter resolved this year.

We continue to build a more inclusive community and have worked hard at striking a renewed relationship with our neighbours, the Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte.

We aim to have a greater recognition and celebration of National Indigenous History Month this June, and The County is exploring the long-standing request from the Mohawks of the Bay of Quinte to return Foresters' Island to them. We expect to have a report later this month from staff that outlines the process.

We will be supporting food insecurity initiatives and continuing to support not-for-profit organizations and The County Foundation. We will also continue to modernize the municipality by offering more services online and improving how we deliver services the community values such as roads, parks, waste collection, etc.

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.

Further, we will work with the Ministry of Transportation to move forward projects such as improving the Picton Town Hill intersection; building a roundabout at County Road 1 and Highway 62; and beginning work on County Road 49's rehabilitation.

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.

Thank you for your work supporting the residents of Prince Edward County, as well as people around the world through your international projects.

You are helping to build stronger, more resilient communities by putting service above self.

May you enjoy a healthy and prosperous 2021, and I look forward to connecting with you through the year, but hopefully in person not via Zoom.

Thank you. I'd be happy to answer any questions.