

Good afternoon, everyone, and happy new year.

We gather on traditional land that has been inhabited by Indigenous peoples from the beginning.

We thank all the generations of people who have taken care of this land for thousands of years.

We recognize and deeply appreciate their historic connection to this place.

Today, Prince Edward County is still home to many First Nations and Metis people, and we are grateful to have an opportunity to meet here, work and continue stewardship on this land.

Welcome and thank you for attending our annual New Year's Levee.

On behalf of County Council and staff, we wish you all a very Happy and Healthy New Year.

This year, we wanted to welcome the New Year with some fun activities for the whole family! Deb Grund from County Kids Read is participating a little later and will be reading stories; fire department has a truck parked out front and can explain what it does and how it works.

Thank you to the community centre staff, and the museum staff, Janice Hubbs, Chris Palmer and Jane Vader; Sandy Latchford, Nancy Wood and the volunteers with the Friends of the Museums for providing refreshments; Greg Moore at Lockyers Country Gardens for the greenery; Mark Kerr and Kate Dafoe who handled municipal communications about the event; and my assistant Joy McLeod for organizing today's festivities. Joy is attending to an urgent family matter and can't be with us today.

I invite you to stick around, enjoy some treats, and participate in the activities like free public skating, cookie decorating, and story time.

In addition to the members of Council who I will introduce in a minute, we are joined today by several honoured guests.

A warm welcome to our Member of Provincial Parliament, Tyler Allsopp.

I would also like to welcome the elected officials and dignitaries from neighbouring municipalities as well as representatives from many community organizations and groups.

Quinte West Mayor Jim Harrison; Mayor Neil Ellis and Councillor Garnet Thompson of the City of Belleville; Hastings County Warden, Bob Mullin; former mayor of Prince

Edward County, Robert Quaiff; and former councillor of Prince Edward County, Gord Fox.

Also joining us today are Col. Andy Bowser, Wing Commander from 8 Wing in Trenton, and Duarte Da Silva, CEO of the Prince Edward County Chamber of Commerce.

It is a pleasure and an honour to work with all of you in the best interests of our communities and the region as a whole.

I am fortunate to work alongside a group of councillors who work tirelessly for our residents and the community throughout the year.

I want to explain for those who maybe unaware just how much members of council do on a day-to-day basis.

Apart from Council and Committee of the Whole meetings that occur every two weeks, and monthly Planning Committee meetings, each member of Council serves on legislated committees or those the municipality has created, all of which require their time and attention each month. They also serve on ward recreation committees.

While the Council members will be familiar to you, I want to take a moment to introduce them and mention the committees each is involved in.

So, here today are:

Councillor Kate MacNaughton – Ward 1 Picton – who serves on.... (Accessibility Advisory Committee; Environmental Advisory Committee; Library Board)

Phil St-Jean – Ward 1 Picton – (Committee of Adjustment; Picton BIA; Water/Wastewater Rates Committee; our Affordable Housing Corporation)

Brad Nieman – Ward 2 Bloomfield/Hallowell – (Audit Committee; PELASS)

Phil Prinzen – Ward 2 Bloomfield/Hallowell who regrettably could not be with us today, serves on – (Agricultural Advisory Committee; Traffic Advisory Committee)

Corey Engelsdorfer – Ward 3 Wellington – also unable to attend, (Audit; Loyalist Parkway Association; Water/Wastewater Rates Committee;)

Sam Grosso – Ward 4 Ameliasburgh – (Built and Cultural Heritage Committee; Traffic Advisory Committee; Visit the County)

Janice Maynard – Ward 4 Ameliasburgh – (Hastings/Quinte Emergency Services; Quinte Conservation Authority; Traffic Advisory Committee)

Roy Pennell – Ward 4 Ameliasburgh – unable to attend, (Accessibility; Water/Wastewater Rates)

Sam Branderhorst – Ward 5 Athol – (Agricultural Advisory Committee; PELASS)

Bill Roberts – Ward 6 Sophiasburgh – (South East Health Unit; OPP Detachment Board)

Chris Braney – Ward 7 Hillier – unable to attend, (PEC Chamber of Commerce; OPP Detachment Board)

David Harrison – Ward 8 North Marysburgh – (Committee of Adjustment)

John Hirsch – Ward 9 South Marysburgh – (Audit; Built and Cultural Heritage Committee; Environmental Advisory Committee; Quinte Conservation Authority; Library Board)

We have also created 18 working groups and task teams to advise Council of specific projects or undertakings that Council has initiated. Typically, once it has completed its work, the working group or task team is dissolved. For instance, Councillor Bill Roberts is a member of the Krasyliv Friendship Working Group working to establish a friendship agreement between the County and that Ukrainian city.

Councillors Braney, Harrison, St-Jean, Nieman and I are on the County Road 49 Working Group, working to get that road rehabilitated (in our lifetime). I look forward to the day when that working group will no longer be necessary

While we are the public face of the municipality, we recognize and appreciate that local government is a team effort.

The strength of this organization are the staff members who work day in and day out to serve this wonderful community.

I want to thank everyone for their work throughout the year.

That team of more than 300 employees is led by our Chief Administrative Officer, Marcia Wallace.

Many of her senior leadership team members are with us today.

We are midway through this term of Council, and only a few days into 2025.

And if you are anything like me, 2024 is already well in the rear-view mirror.

I want to tap the brakes a bit, though, and reflect on the past year before looking ahead to 2025.

When I look back on 2024, I can't help but think of the day back in August when a dream became a reality.

To witness shovels in the ground for the new Prince Edward County Memorial Hospital was truly remarkable.

The municipality along with so many residents and local businesses have proudly "Backed the Build" for many, many years.

We all look forward to seeing the new hospital take shape as we move toward its opening in 2027.

Take a look at the progress that has already been made when you leave the event today.

We also received positive news on another front of the local health-care system in 2024.

County Docs, with support from the municipality, continues to make progress in addressing the local family doctor shortage in our community.

In January 2024, there were approximately 2,000 Prince Edward County residents on the provincial wait list for a family doctor.

750 of those residents have been rostered since then, with another 750 confirmed to be rostered by March 2025.

This represents a 75% reduction in the provincial waitlist in just one year.

We have made significant strides in 2024, and I am hopeful we can get even more residents off the wait list in 2025.

With the extremely high need for access to primary care in our community, I was encouraged to see the Prince Edward Family Health Team pursue creative and innovative solutions to help make a difference.

The Family Health Team's Community Clinic for Unattached Patients helped hundreds of patients access the care they needed.

This important work was recently recognized with a Spotlight Award from the Association of Family Health Teams of Ontario.

Congratulations to all involved, but particularly to Barinder Gill who leads the FHT, and Adam Hambly responsible for our doctor recruitment program at County Docs.

We look forward to another ground-breaking ceremony early in 2025 as the municipality moves ahead with the redevelopment of its long-term care home.

A redeveloped facility will give people access to the quality long-term care they deserve in a safe, home-like environment.

Increasing the number of beds at the facility will also go a long way to reducing the pressure on the local hospitals as more and more residents get the right care in the right place.

Having a roof over your head is one of the most important necessities of life that, sadly, some people in our community struggle to acquire and maintain.

The challenges of affordable and attainable housing continue to be top of mind for the municipality.

The municipality opened Leeward House in 2024, a transitional housing facility and the first of its kind in Prince Edward County.

The facility moved nine people directly from homelessness to a supported congregate living environment with on-site staff. Residents receive programs, services, and supports they require as they move toward permanent, sustainable housing.

Transitional housing is one aspect of an overall housing continuum that the municipality is looking to address by working collaboratively with community partners.

To support the construction of affordable housing units, the municipality finalized the purchase of the Queen Elizabeth School property in 2024.

The municipality aims to redevelop the property to serve the needs of the community, specifically around affordable housing as well as providing rental space for community-based agencies who offer services in the health care, childcare, youth, education and training, food security and community support sectors.

The municipality has entered into detailed negotiations with New View Holdings to facilitate the redevelopment project, with more details and public consultation taking place this year.

The municipality cannot fund these initiatives alone so we are doing everything we can to access financial support from upper levels of government for affordable housing.

We remain hopeful that our application to the second round of the Housing Accelerator Fund will receive a favourable response from the Government of Canada.

We have seen a willingness from upper levels of government to invest in Prince Edward County as a growing and thriving rural community.

The provincial government's investment in our new hospital is a clear example of that.

On September 9th, last year, Premier Ford came to Wellington to announce that The County received \$18.3 million through the Province of Ontario's Housing-Enabling Water Systems Fund to support a regional water plant and a new raw water intake in Wellington.

The new plant will provide the necessary capacity to unlock nearly 4,200 housing units of all types, including rentals, seniors communities, and long-term care spaces, over the next seven years, with another 4,500 housing units between 2033 and 2043.

The municipality is planning and investing in its water systems to help ensure well-managed growth protects the rural character of our region, while providing a mix of housing and economic opportunities in existing villages and centres.

We broke ground on the new watermain and sanitary sewer for Wellington in 2024.

New water and wastewater infrastructure will continue to be a focus in 2025.

Concerning other infrastructure, The County has applied for \$20 million from the Housing-Enabling Core Services Fund to support the rehabilitation of County Road 49.

The state of disrepair of this vital entry point into and out of The County is understood by Premier Ford and other ministers, and certainly by our MPP Tyler Allsopp who has helped us immensely to keep this issue a top priority at Queen's Park.

Thank you, Tyler, your efforts are very much appreciated.

We recognize that these large - but necessary - infrastructure projects can often cause a certain amount of disruption to the community.

We have heard the concerns expressed by residents, and that's why we will be doing everything we can to limit the impact as much as possible while also better communicating about these projects in a timely manner.

Moving these infrastructure projects forward the right way is critical for ensuring that Prince Edward County remains a place people want to live, play, build, and invest in.

Our community will inevitably evolve in 2025 and beyond.

I am excited by the work ahead required to strengthen our community as we look to respond and adapt to this growth and change.

We will work with the broader community to develop and implement a local action plan for reducing emissions and combat climate change.

We will strive to expand public transit to help residents move more easily, efficiently and sustainably throughout Prince Edward County and neighbouring communities.

We will finalize the plan for managing and protecting our built heritage and cultural heritage landscapes.

We will complete the plan that will help us offer the recreation facilities and services that meet the needs of our growing and changing population over the next decade.

And we will continue to work with the province to make that other dream become a reality with the rehabilitation of County Road 49, and the construction of a roundabout at the intersection of County Road 1 and Highway 62.

These are just a few endeavours that will provide us with exciting opportunities over the next 12 months.

It won't be easy and there will be obstacles along the way.

But together, we can rise to the challenge and work together to foster a well-rounded community.

Once again, on behalf of Council and staff, I wish you all a safe and Happy New Year.

Thank you.