



MEMBERS OF COUNCIL
FROM THE DESK OF:

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Councillor Michael Harris,

I do wish to thank you for your email of December 21st regarding the path forward on our upcoming budget. I would like to now make recommendations that will be considered for the budget both for items particular to the City of Cambridge and items that will have an affect across the Region of Waterloo.

Therefore, I have decided to put my concerns and recommendations in a memo form so they can receive the proper attention before we sit down as a council to review all aspects of the upcoming budget. It is my request that each issue that I have raised is separately dealt with as a budget item.

Health and Social Services:

To begin, in my own personal analysis of social issues in the City of Cambridge along with numerous discussions with various stakeholders and staff, it has become apparent that there is a lack of resources on a number of levels that I feel that need to be discussed and considered for the Cambridge community.

Youth Shelter:

Since Argus House has changed their working model, we have no shelter for youth in Cambridge and many stakeholders have made it clear that a majority of homeless Cambridge youth do not wish to go to Kitchener because it is not their community and as a result, they feel out of place, and a number end up on the streets.

Women's shelter:

The same issues arise as with the youth shelter where women do not want to access the YW in Kitchener because their supports are here in Cambridge.

Detox beds:

We currently do not have any detox beds in Cambridge and the frustration in trying to access the limited number of beds at Grand River Hospital turns a number of people away who are attempting to seek help.

Bus tickets/Bus passes/ Shuttle service:

Individuals from the Bridges need to access necessary services and appointments in the Cambridge and KW area if in the transitional process we are intent in moving people out of the shelter system.

Outreach workers:

There is an urgent need in assisting “The Bridges” in properly housing individuals. The Bridges has housed over 200 people since the beginning of the pandemic and they are in a critical need for two outreach workers to assist them in their continuing efforts. The issue is clear. In order to keep people housed, it is important on an ongoing basis to have supports in place once individuals graduate from the shelter space. Both a nurse and trained social worker are needed to continue the successes of the programme.

Transitional housing:

It has become apparent that Cambridge is in need of transitional housing and I feel as a region that we need to continue to investigate possibilities with discussions from local stakeholders of securing various buildings on the market that would accommodate those needs. Transitional housing is critical for the security of individuals and the stability that it provides so that individuals can make better choices about their lives. A public discussion should include various stakeholders in the community, especially the Bridges, and a separate dialogue should start between the Region and the Bridges regarding its future and direction in the upcoming years. The present human landscape and its challenges now involves everything from a growing senior population in shelters which is about 40% with their “unequal” medical, aging needs, to a percentage of individuals using drugs in the shelter to the need for transitional housing for those that graduate from the shelter system.

Approaches:

It became apparent to me that a number of the agencies that I spoke to had a story to tell of needs, challenges and frustration in their efforts to serve the vulnerable populations in their sphere of care. On reflection, it became apparent that a community discussion needs to take place in two major areas in order to stitch together singular concerns in to a more comprehensive approach to community needs.

First: I believe we need to invite a number of service providers across the region to a round table discussion on the needs of the regional community in a number of areas before the finalization of the Regional budget in order to get a more rounded view of concerns. Such providers would include but not be restricted to the Bridges, both food banks, Neighbourhood associations, John Neufeld (House of Friendship Addiction Treatment Centre), Joe and Stephanie Mancini (The Working Centre), Sandy Dietrich-Bell (oneROOF) and “SHOW” from Waterloo.

Second: We need to do a complete review of the drug strategy in the Region of Waterloo. I agree with a recent published article that stated, “We are in the midst of an ongoing drug crisis”. We cannot simply continue forward on the same pathway accepting over 100 annual overdose deaths. Let me frame a perspective. Would we simply tolerate 604 deaths over the last five years in roundabout traffic accidents with the same subdued acceptance? As one outreach worker publicly stated, “the lack of concern from the wider community about the death toll [overdoses] doesn’t make sense to her, especially when some people die without anyone to identify them”. Clearly, this needs a full council and community discussion in order to forge a more comprehensive approach towards a drug strategy.

Cambridge Transportation:

The truck diversion study in Cambridge was an excellent start in bringing to the attention of the regional community the traffic issues putting undue stress on the road system in the community. Along with some short-term relief from a possible ban of truck traffic in the downtown, which will come before Regional Council in March, the real need is for a completion of the by-pass for the city. Therefore, it is important to know when this is going to be completed and to strategize on how this by-pass can be accelerated in the ten-year capital forecast in order to see an earlier completion date. Also, in concert with this concern, is the need for a discussion now of a new traffic bridge crossing the Grand River at a future date.

Cambridge has no rapid transit system. Discussions around a Light Rail Transit Extension to the community along with a GO train proposal to the Guelph line need to be addressed with updated costs and complete time lines. This needs to be seen as a priority considering the fact that 150,000 regional residents have no proper access to either type of system now or apparently in the near future.

Summary:

I am fully aware of the challenges that are inherent in this present budget and the need to be mindful of the ability for residents to afford increases. However, I think we also need to be mindful of the human scale of concerns that now finds itself in encampments, shelters and without proper housing or rehabilitation centres to tackle the growing health needs of the regional community. The budget in my opinion should be looked at in a different perspective. The health and housing needs of our residents needs to be a major priority even if it means delaying capital projects forecasted in the coming years or if it means reducing funding in a number of items in our current budget.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Doug Craig', written in a cursive style.

Doug Craig, Regional Councillor, Cambridge