
Subject: Development Applications Monitoring Report - 2020 Year End

Report to: Planning and Economic Development Committee

Report date: Wednesday, June 16, 2021

Recommendations

1. That Report PDS 24-2021 **BE RECEIVED** for information; and,
2. That a copy of Report PDS 24-2021 **BE CIRCULATED** to Local Area Municipalities, Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority, Niagara Home Builders Association, Niagara Industrial Association, local Chambers of Commerce and School Boards.

Key Facts

- The purpose of this report is to inform Regional Council of 2020 development application activity in Niagara Region.
- Regional Development Planning and Engineering staff reviewed 595 development applications in 2020.
- Regional Development Planning and Engineering staff provided comments for 552 pre-consultation meetings in 2020.
- The Region received \$1,353,810 in review fees for development applications in 2020 (54% increase from 2019 fees).

Financial Considerations

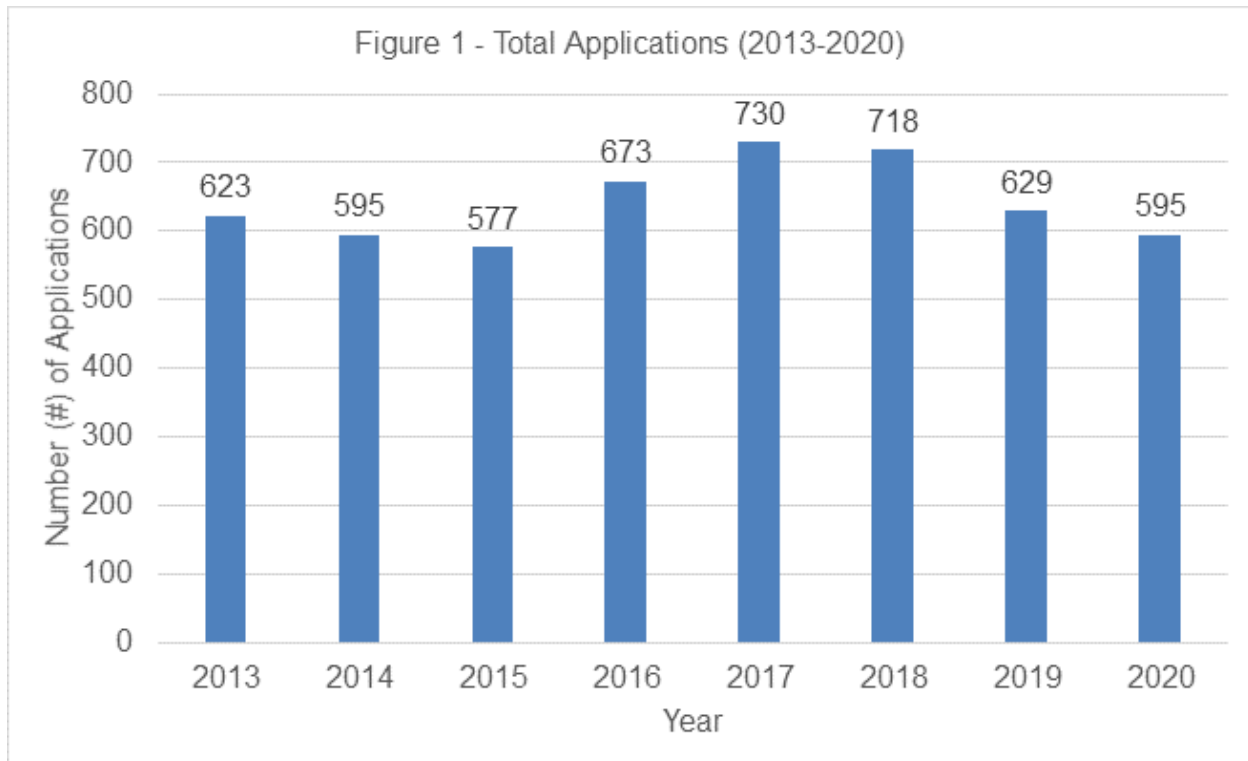
There are no direct financial implications associated with this report.

Analysis

Development Applications

Regional Development Services staff reviewed 595 development applications in 2020, representing a 5% decrease from 629 applications in 2019. Figure 1 illustrates the number of applications considered by Development Planning and Engineering staff from 2013 to 2020. These development applications are circulated to the Region based on Provincial legislation requirements and the existing Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the Region and Local Area Municipalities for planning in Niagara. The decrease appears to be attributed to the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic and

adapting to the online format during the initial lockdown. The first full month after the lockdown (April 2020) there was a drop in applications, followed by a steady recovery in application volumes during subsequent months.

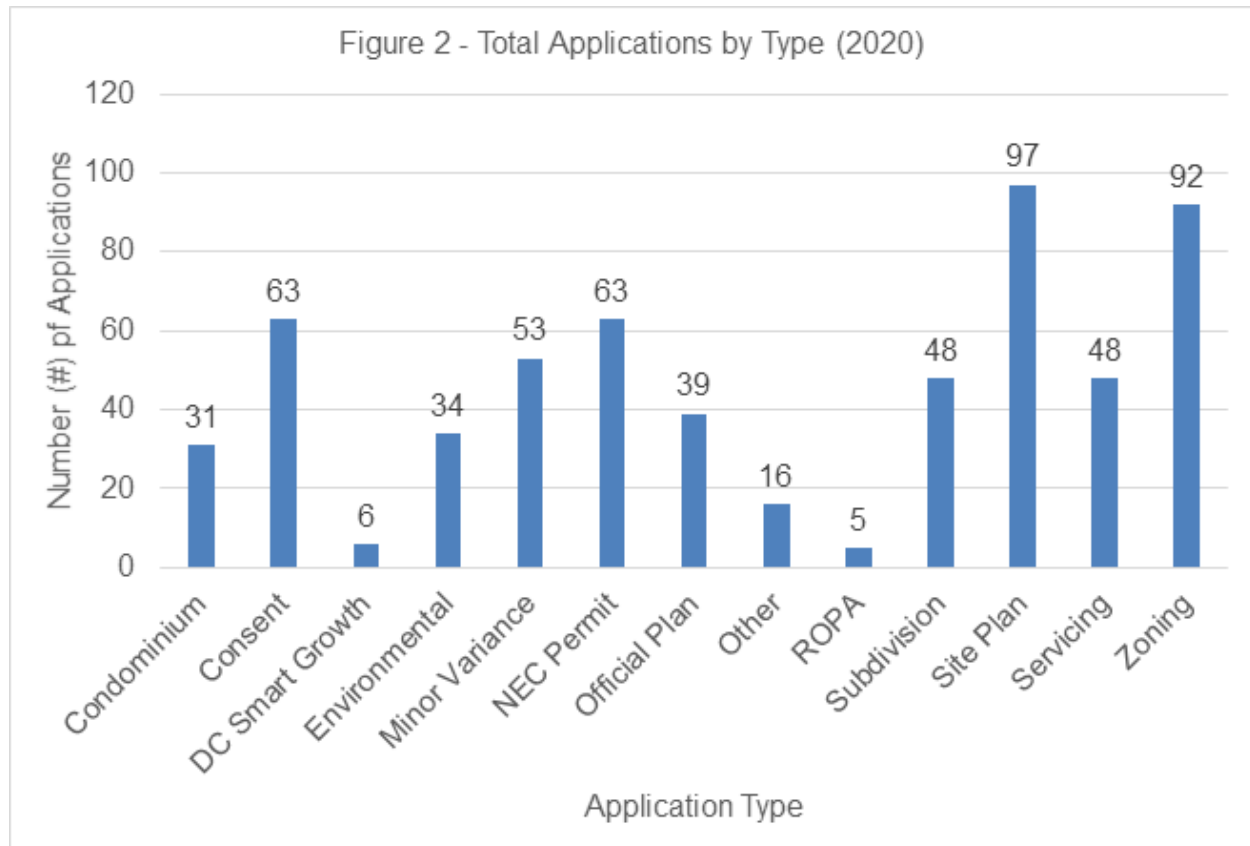


Staff expects the volume of development applications to be higher in 2021, as the trends in the fourth quarter of 2020 showed an uptake in applications by 17% compared to the fourth quarter of 2019. A look at Q1 2021 application volumes (202) reinforces this continuing trend as a 36% increase in volumes was experienced in comparison with 2020 (148). In addition, April 2021 volumes (76) was 55% above 2020 levels (49).

Additionally, the Planning and Development Services has the ability to waive its review function on certain types of minor development applications in local municipalities. This represents an effort to increase efficiency in the planning review function in Niagara and is a result of changes to the MOU.

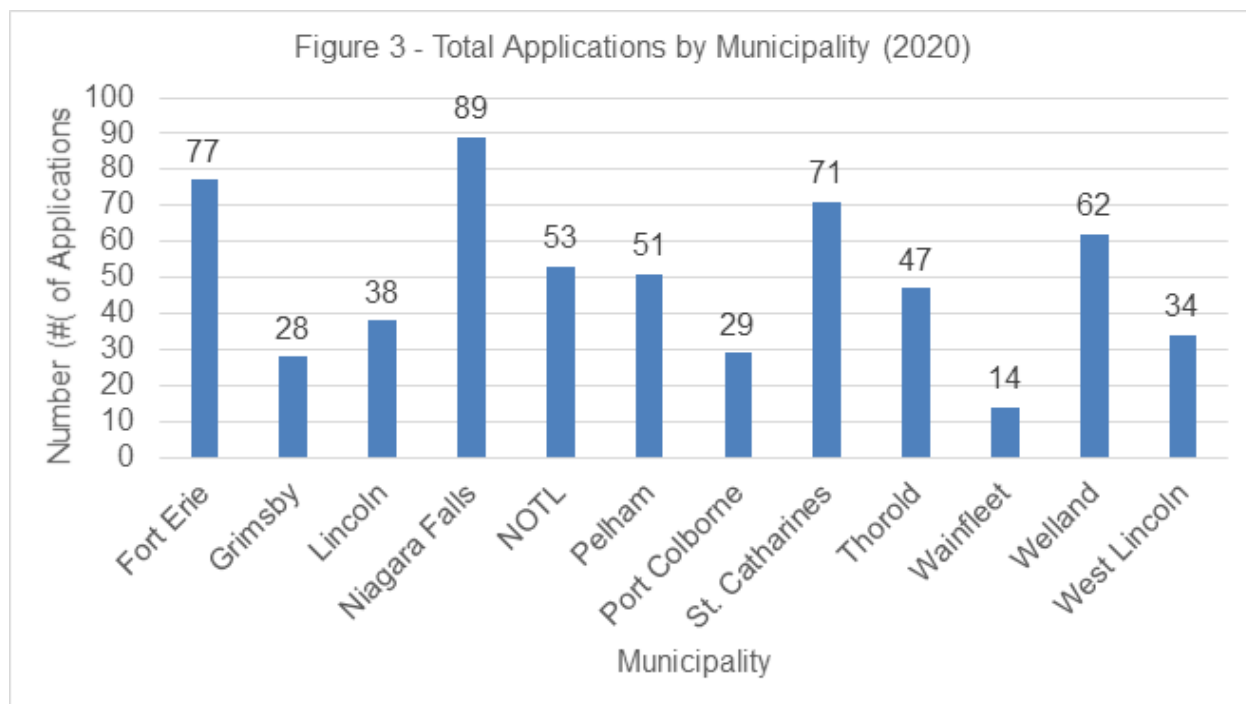
Figure 2 below provides the breakdown of development applications, by type, reviewed by Regional staff in 2020. Some complex development proposals often require multiple planning approvals. As an example, subdivision and condominium applications may also need amendments to the municipal Official Plan and/or Zoning By-law to facilitate the development. The categories with the most applications considered by Regional

staff were Site Plans (97), closely followed by Zoning By-law Amendments (92), and Consent (i.e. severances) and Niagara Escarpment Commission Development Permits (both 63).



The distribution of applications circulated to the Region by local municipalities during 2020 is shown on Figure 3. This information indicates relatively high levels of development activity in several communities. The municipalities with the most applications circulated to the Region were Niagara Falls (89), Fort Erie (77), St. Catharines (71), and Welland (62). As stated previously, application volumes were lower in 2020 compared to recent years because of the COVID-19 pandemic, however, the third and fourth quarters of 2020 saw a significant increase in volume.

Regional staff were also involved in reviewing several complex development applications in 2020, as highlighted in Appendix 1 of this report. This often requires review that is more extensive and can affect a broad range of issues (i.e. environmental impacts, traffic impacts and urban design considerations, etc.).



Pre-consultation Meetings

Development Services staff attend regular pre-consultation meeting sessions two days each month in each local municipality. These meetings are to determine complete application submission requirements and assist in the processing of applications. The COVID-19 pandemic required planning staff at the Region and the local municipalities to pivot to an online meeting format starting in April 2020. Developers, property owners, local staff and agencies were able to participate in these virtual pre-consultation meetings.

In 2020, Regional staff attended 552 pre-consultation meetings, which is an 11% decrease from the 2019 total (see Figure 4). This is likely a result of a pause in pre-consultations at the beginning of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, while municipalities adopted to the online format. Pre-consultation volumes increased in the third and fourth quarters of 2020 and, generally, the number of pre-consultation meetings is an indicator of future development applications. Accordingly, staff expect development application numbers to increase in 2021.

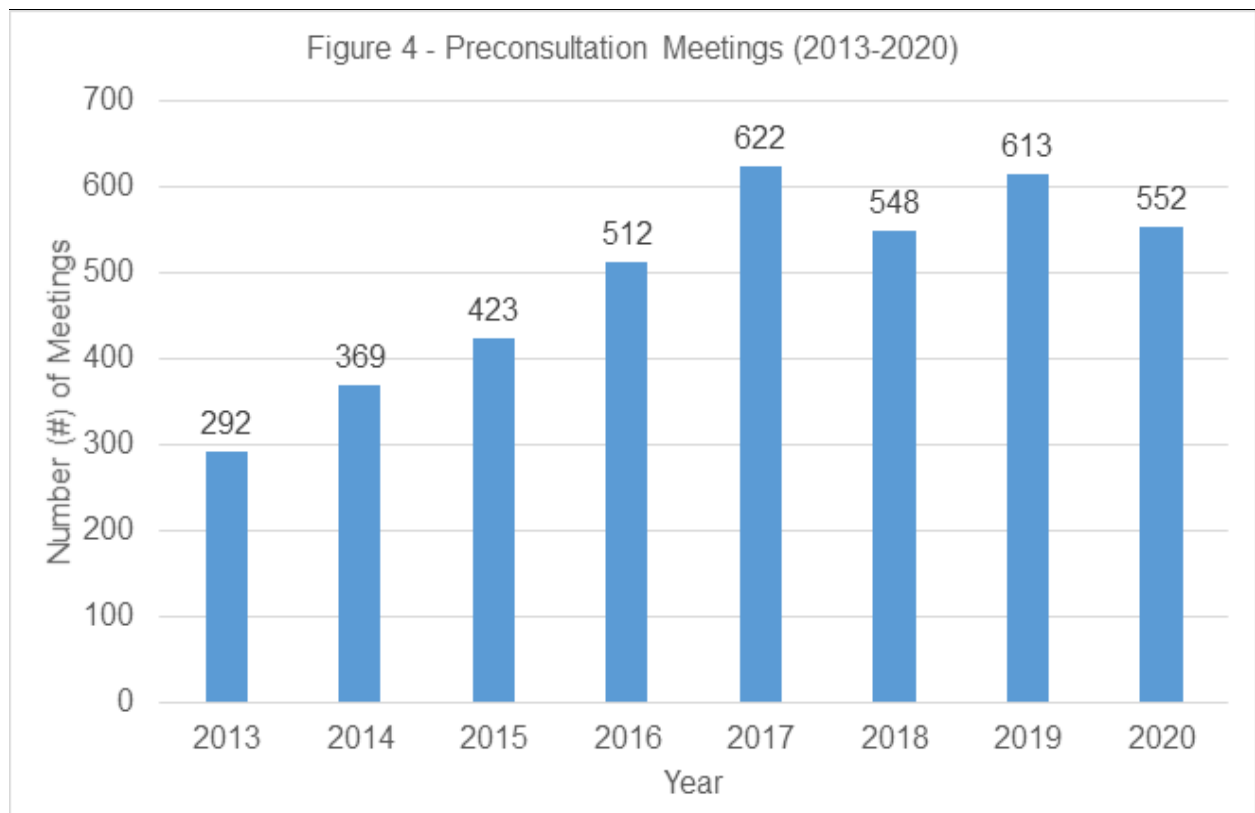
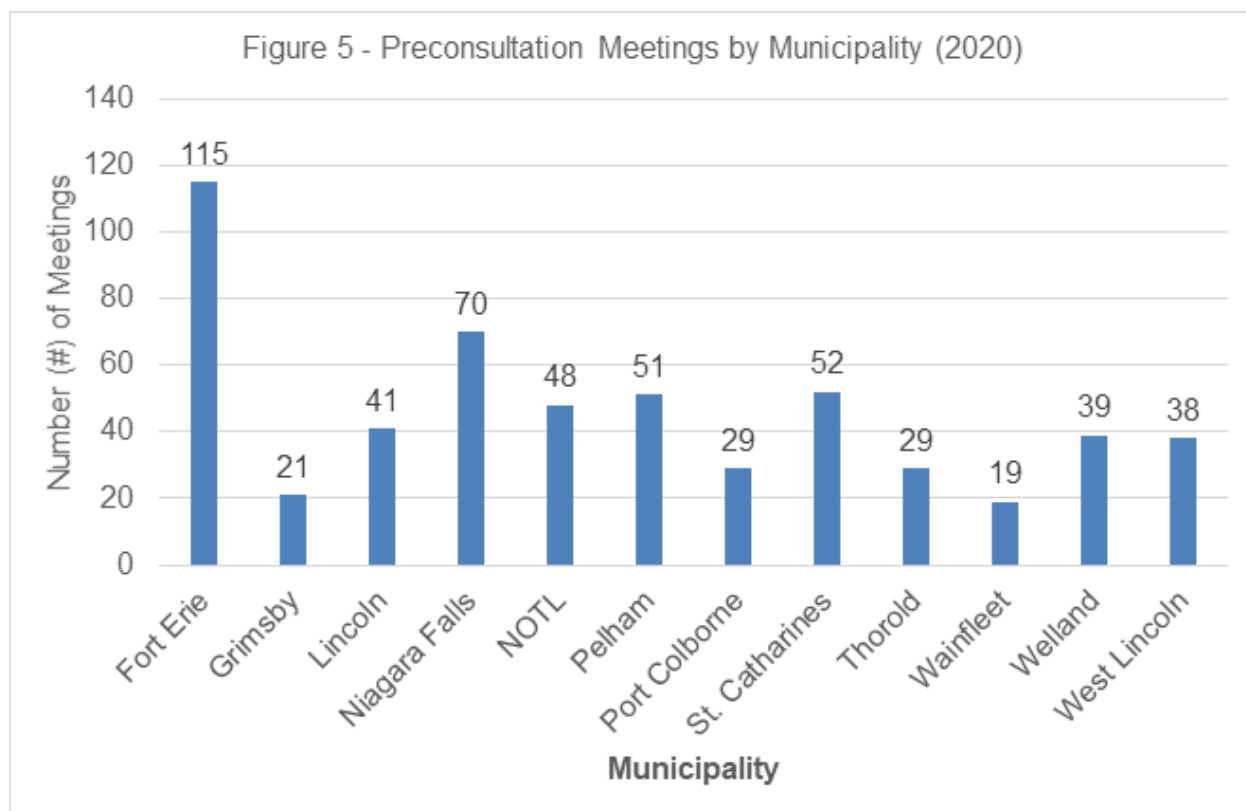


Figure 5 illustrates the number of pre-consultation meetings by municipality in 2020 that involved Regional staff. The municipalities with the highest levels of pre-consultation activity were Fort Erie (115) and Niagara Falls (70), followed by St. Catharines (52), Pelham (51), and Niagara-on-the-Lake (48).

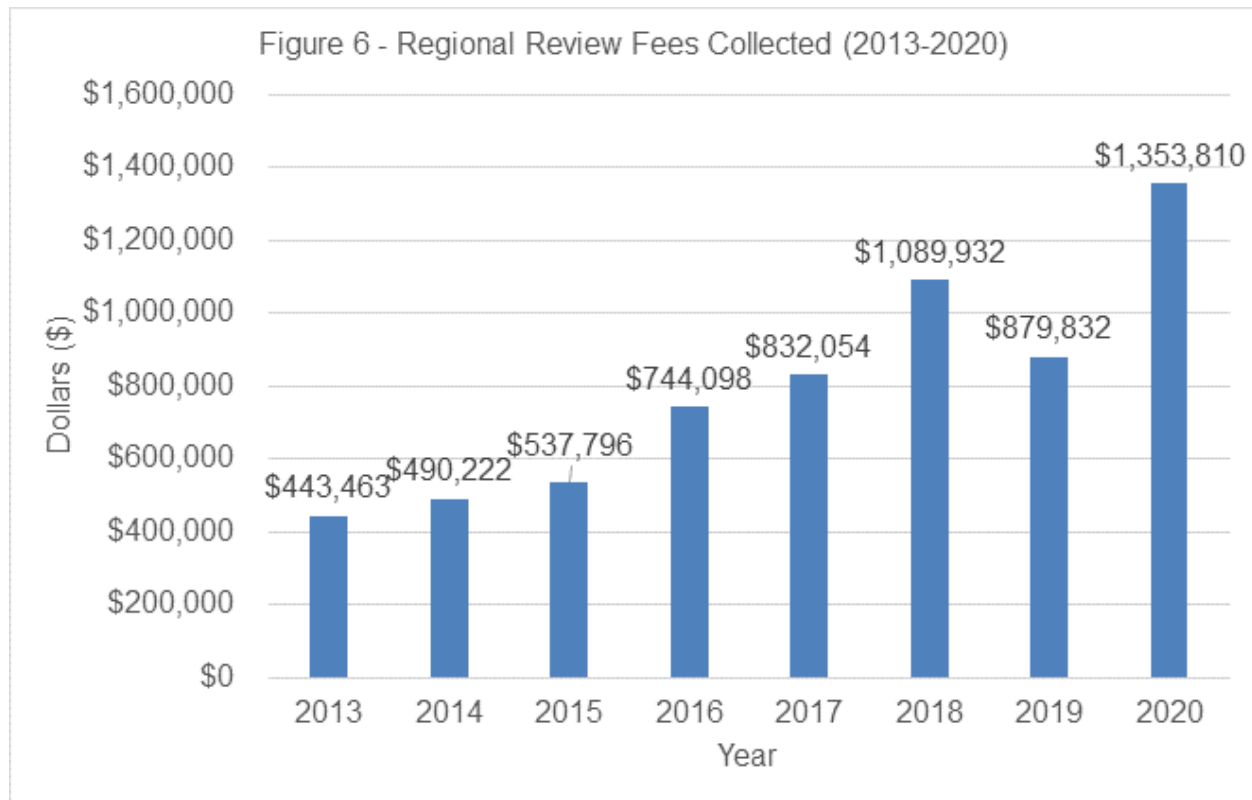


Regional Review Fees

Regional review fees are intended to offset Regional costs for the development review service. Figure 6 summarizes the fees collected between 2013 and 2020 for the Regional review of development applications. The 2020 total of \$1,353,810 represents an increase of 54% from 2019. This relates to an increase in the number of complex applications received (i.e. Regional Official Plan Amendments, Official Plan Amendments and Draft Plans of Subdivision/Condominium), which generally have higher review fees. As we expect the total volume and complexity of development applications to increase from 2020 to 2021, development review fees are also expected to increase.

The Region received a Regional Official Plan Amendment (ROPA) application in March 2021 for an expansion to the Port Colborne Quarry and anticipate potentially receiving two additional ROPA applications in 2021 for a proposed new quarry and an expansion of an existing quarry. These applications are the most complex “development” applications, which are very time intensive to process with many technical studies that often require peer reviews to assist staff in areas in which the department does not have in-house expertise. The application fees approved by Regional Council reflect the

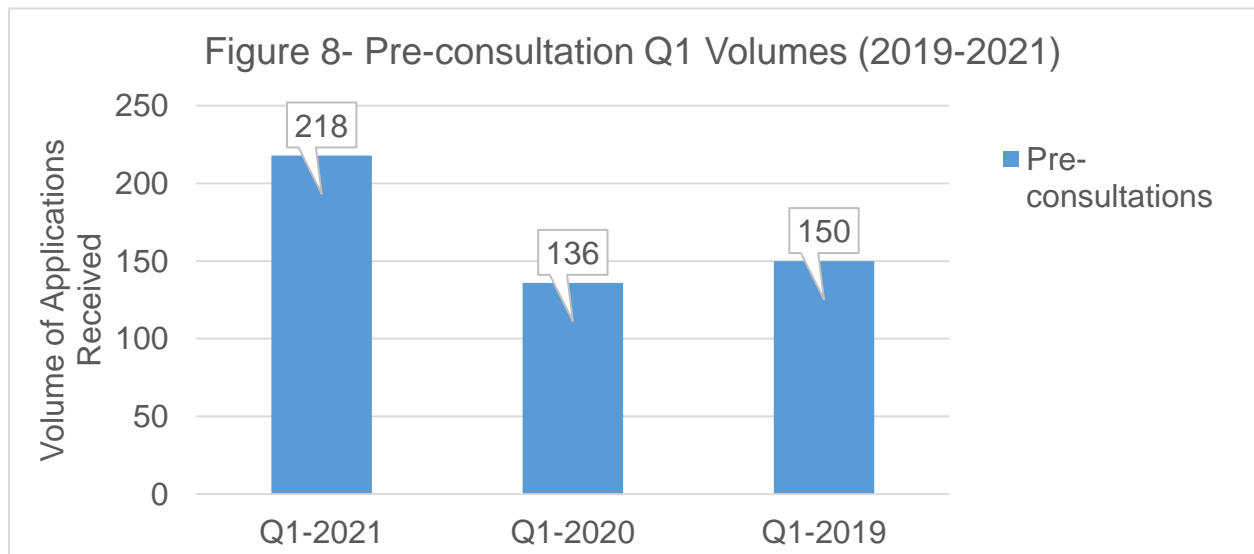
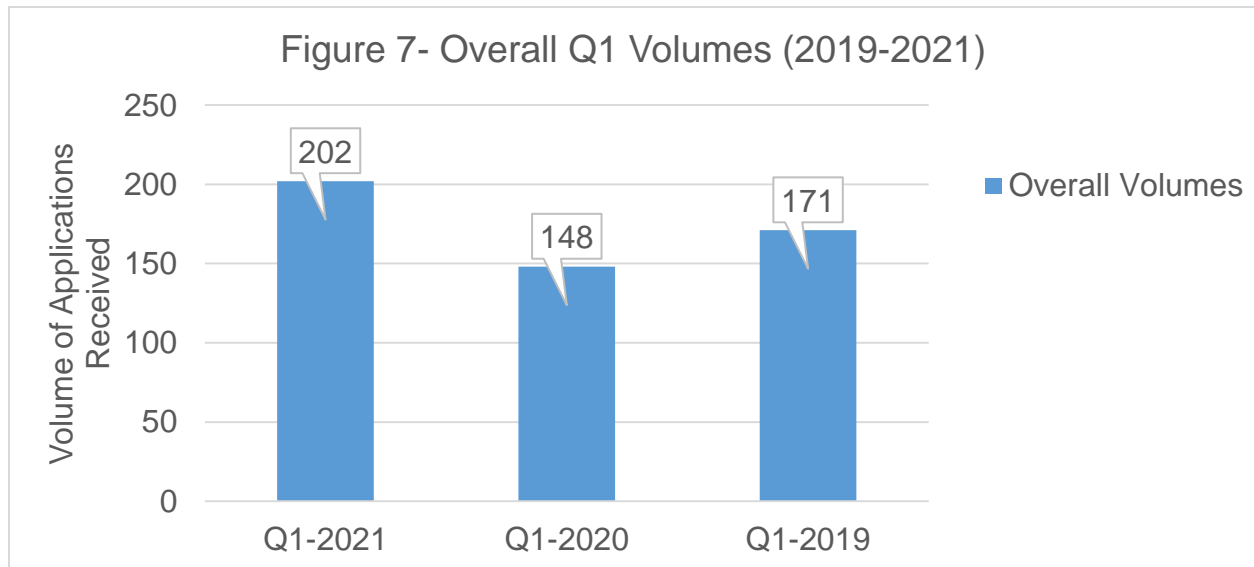
complexity and staff resources involved in reviewing quarry applications. As a best practice the Region, with participation of the affected local area municipality and the Niagara Peninsula Conservation Authority, has implemented a Joint Agency Review Team (JART) to share resources including a single peer reviewer for each technical study in order to maximize efficiencies.



2021 Outlook

As outlined earlier in this report, Staff anticipate an increase in application volumes in 2021 based on the first quarter metrics. Regional Development Services staff reviewed 202 development applications in Q1 of 2021, which is an increase of 36% compared to 148 applications in Q1 of 2020. Figure 7 illustrates the number of applications considered by Development Planning and Engineering staff in Q1 of 2019, 2020 and 2021. This increase is likely attributed to applications that were paused during the first and second wave of the pandemic, ongoing public health requirements/restrictions on the construction industry that allows for additional time to plan for development, and historically low interest rates.

As previously indicated, Staff expects the volume of development applications to continue to be high throughout 2021. The trends in pre-consultation volumes for the first quarter of 2021 show an increase in pre-consultation meetings by 60% compared to the Q1 of 2020 and 45% compared to Q1 of 2019. This is illustrated in Figure 8.



The increased level of development in recent years represents a “*new normal*” for the Region. Regional Development Planning has adjusted its approach and practices to be solution oriented and proactive. By providing ongoing support to our local Municipalities, the Region strives to realize complete community planning outcomes that encourage the best possible development throughout the Region.

Urban Design’s contribution to Development Applications

In addition to assisting in the review of development applications, the Urban Design and Landscape Architecture team also undertook several programs in 2020 that support the goals of achieving well designed built environments. These programs celebrated design excellence, provided synergies to development applications and improved development outcomes. The urban design team also assists local planning teams by providing urban design peer review to significant developments within those communities. To support local planning and urban design goals staff prepare design alternatives and contribute to the discussions with developers in support of local planning partners. In particular, the urban design team has collaborated in design charrettes to improve the design outcomes of development applications. The Urban Design review function within Development Planning is a key component to elevate the quality of development in Niagara and achieve industry leading results, reflecting positively on the Niagara brand.

Alternatives Reviewed

None.

Relationship to Council Strategic Priorities

This report provides information on development application activity that contributes to strong economic prosperity throughout the communities within the Niagara Region. This relates to Council’s Strategic Priority of Supporting Business and Economic Growth, as well as Sustainable and Engaging Government through ensuring high quality, efficient and coordinated core services.

Other Pertinent Reports

- [PDS 4-2020](#): Development Applications Monitoring Report - 2019 Year End

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