Councillors,

I want to start by formally acknowledging that mental health, addictions and homelessness have a real and measurable impact on our region. In addition to the lives we have lost, and the lasting emotional toll on the loved ones who are left behind, there is a significant financial impact on municipal programs and services, as well as our hospital systems, legal system and police. It would be no understatement to say that the negative effects of mental health issues, addictions and homelessness are substantial, complex, demanding and considerably diverse.

As Councillors are aware, under the Emergency Management and Civil Protections Act, R.S.O. 1990 (EMCPA), the declaration of an emergency is made by the head of council. As the head of Regional Council, I take my responsibilities under the EMCPA seriously, and I consider the formal declaration of an emergency to be action that should not be made lightly. It is my view that these declarations ought to be reserved for situations where the implementation of the Region’s emergency management plan, or heightened local awareness, would be likely to have a measurable impact on the outcome of the situation.

While tragic and deeply concerning, the challenges that Niagara is experiencing in regard to mental health, addictions and homelessness are largely societal and systemic. It is the view of our professional staff in both Community Services and Public Health (as outlined in the attached COM-C 7-2021 and PHD-C 4-202) that implementation of the Region’s emergency management plan in relation to these issues will not make a quantifiable difference to the current state in Niagara. With this understanding, I believe it is important that both Regional Council and members of the public understand that this declaration would be largely symbolic at this time.
As homelessness, addictions and mental health are primarily the jurisdiction of the Province of Ontario (with no formal requirement for local municipal contributions), members of council may consider passing an alternative motion requesting the province declare the emergency instead of the Region doing so. In regard to our local contributions to housing specifically, our recent KPMG report found that the Niagara Region is already contributing significantly more local property tax dollars to address its housing challenges as compared to the other regions across Ontario.

It is also crucial to note that the declaration of emergency does not bring with it additional resources or funding from any senior level of government to address the issue. While the EMCPA does speak to the ability of the head of council to make all orders necessary “to protect property and the health, safety and welfare of the inhabitants of the emergency area” it is limited to what powers are afforded to me under the law. In practice, emergency declarations are designed to address incidents that are typically temporary in nature stemming from a specific extraordinary event, requiring an immediate and coordinated response beyond the normal capabilities of a municipality to manage in order to preserve public safety (the Province references several natural disasters, as well as pandemics). The EMCPA was not designed to address social and economic problems of an ongoing systemic nature that cannot be resolved in days, weeks or months.

As noted by staff, I believe I should also caution Regional Council that the declaration of an emergency may set both a precedent for similar declarations to be made in the future, as well as an expectation that there will be additional resources allocated to these distinct and complex issues. As there is no additional funding which accompanies a declaration, Regional Council would be required to consider an increase to the property tax levy for funding, or reallocated existing funding away from other programs to address this issue. Moreover, making symbolic emergency declarations that are not directly tied to action may diminish the importance of future declarations, weakening their effect across the community, and potentially impacting the reputation of Regional Council.

All that being said, given the serious impacts of homelessness, addictions and mental health on our community, I am prepared to sign an emergency declaration should it be the direction of Regional Council.

Sincerely,

Jim Bradley, Chair
Niagara Region