
Subject: COVID-19 Preliminary Overview of Financial Impacts

Report to: Regional Council

Report date: Thursday, April 23, 2020

Recommendations

1. That the Regional Chair **BE DIRECTED** to lobby provincial and federal levels of government for financial assistance to support Niagara Region's COVID-19 emergency response; and
2. That Niagara Region **BE DIRECTED** to participate in efforts with other municipalities seeking financial support from senior levels of government for the financial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic; and
3. That the Regional Clerk **BE DIRECTED** to forward this report to local MPs, local MPPs, the Federation of Canadian Municipalities and the Association of Municipalities Ontario.

Key Facts

- The purpose of this report is to provide an early indication of the potential financial impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak on the Niagara Region. Estimates and assumptions in this report are fluid and changing on a weekly basis.
- Staff expect that a budget adjustment related to the changes in services, incremental cost and lost revenue associated with the COVID-19 emergency response will be required. At this time, full impacts are unknown and staff will bring back a proposed budget adjustment for Council approval when more clarity around funding sources and full cost is available.
- The Region's preliminary estimate of the net cost of COVID-19 pandemic before funding announcements up to June 30, 2020 is \$9.3 million.
- Incremental costs and lost revenue estimates total \$9.6 million and may be offset by identified cost savings and mitigations of \$5.7 million for a current net budget impact \$3.9 million. The remaining \$5.4 million cost relates to already budgeted resources unavailable to work or redeployed to directly support the emergency response.
- The Region has received confirmed funding announcement of \$4.2 million in specific areas. Review of the eligible cost criteria for this funding is underway and restrictions do apply. Staff are looking for ways to fully leverage this funding and it is expected to support some costs that occur after our June 30, 2020 cost projection above.

Financial Considerations

Given the amount of uncertainty around timelines and availability of funding sources, it is difficult at this time to quantify the full impact of individual items as well as the overall impact to the Region. That being said, staff are of the preliminary view that ultimately the pandemic will result in a 2020 operating shortfall at year-end. Discussions have commenced with respect to opportunities for cost savings across operating and capital budgets. In addition, there are certain actions that the Region could take to offset a shortfall including use of the Taxpayer Relief Reserve. Staff will provide updates to Council with respect to year-end projections and any action that may be required as more details become known.

As of December 31, 2019 the Taxpayer Relief Reserve balance was \$23.8 million which is 4.2% of gross budgeted expenditures excluding agency boards and commissions (our minimum reserve target per the reserve policy is 10% of gross budgeted operating expenses or \$56 million at December 31, 2019).

In addition, staff recommend exploring all opportunities for financial assistance from senior levels of government and will provide updates to Council on any actions being undertaken by Provincial and Federal governments as they are announced. The Province and Federal governments have delayed the release of their respective 2020/21 budgets.

Analysis

Staff have been monitoring and assessing the potential financial impacts to the Region since the onset of the pandemic. Only two months after approving the 2020 Regional budget, a variety of operating expenditures and revenues are now expected to be impacted. While it is still too early to fully understand and quantify all of the potential impacts, some preliminary projections have been made.

To facilitate this analysis, projected costs and savings related to the pandemic have been made up to June 30, 2020

The Region has categorized impacts into 4 high-level categories

1. **Total costs supported by our approved base budget.** This category represents cost of resources unavailable to work or redeployed from their main work functions to directly support the emergency response. While the Region does have an established base budget to support these expenditures, it is important to note that the work these resources are performing during the emergency is not as originally contemplated in the base budget. This may result in delays in work plans and/or backlogs after the emergency is complete.

2. **Costs incremental to base budget.** This category represents all incremental costs over and above the approved 2020 base budget directly related to supporting the emergency.
3. **Lost revenue.** This category represents the loss of revenue that had been planned to fund the 2020 budget.
4. **Cost savings and mitigations.** This category represents identified cost savings the Region may expect to realize as a result of COVID-19 measures and managing the emergency.

The following is a summary of the financial impacts.

	Spent & Committed As of Date	Spent & committed	Projected to June 30	Total
Costs supported by our approved base budget				
EOC Dedicated Resources ¹	09-Apr	\$ 615,424	\$ 1,994,740	\$ 2,610,164
Lost Productivity – Staff Unable to Work ²	04-Apr	443,137	1,831,633	2,274,770
Redeployed Resources ³	04-Apr	86,149	356,083	442,232
Total costs supported by our approved base budget		1,144,710	4,182,456	5,327,166
Costs incremental to base budget				
Additional labour related costs ⁴	04-Apr	748,294	3,092,949	3,841,243
Purchases made or committed ⁵	09-Apr	1,770,942	2,104,081	3,875,023
Total costs incremental to base budget		2,519,236	5,197,030	7,716,266
Lost Revenue ⁶		-	1,914,708	1,914,708
Cost savings/mitigations ⁷		-	(5,673,142)	(5,673,142)
Net cost impact before funding announcements		\$ 3,663,946	\$ 5,621,052	\$ 9,284,998

¹ Assumes 100% of salary and benefit costs to any staff member fully activated in the Regional EOC, Public Health EOC, and EMS EOC.

² Staff unable to work due to self-isolation, needing to care for family members or being sick directly associated with COVID-19.

³ Currently only quantified for resources redeployed to the public health call centre. Redeployment in other areas in the organization has started to occur and will be quantified in the future.

⁴ Additional salary, benefits and overtime costs related to managing the emergency.

⁵ Additional purchase commitments made to directly support the emergency (e.g. cleaning supplies and services, personal protective equipment, emergency shelter, screening, advertising).

⁶ Estimated loss of expected revenue sources (e.g. rental income on owned units, transit fare revenue, business licensing revenue, development applications, parental fees, POA infraction revenue).

⁷ Estimated cost savings and mitigations (e.g. gapping of vacant positions, reduced non-emergency repair work, travel costs, transit service costs, electricity, cancelled events).

Impacts by department can be found in Appendix 2. Some of the more significant incremental costs and lost revenue items included in the estimate are outlined below:

- **Niagara Regional Transit:** fare revenue reduction due to reduced ridership and cancellation of Niagara College on-campus spring/summer classes;
- **POA Court:** Reduced POA revenue due to lower ticket volumes and court closure, with some related expenditure savings offsets;
- **Public Health:** Increased staffing and overtime, supplies (including personal protective equipment) and cleaning costs; additional staff to support higher call volumes;
- **Paramedic Services:** Increased staffing, overtime, supplies (including personal protective equipment), and cleaning;
- **Housing:** Increased cleaning costs in common spaces; lower tenant income levels would result in higher rent subsidies at community housing units and lower rent payments at NRH units;
- **Homelessness programs:** Increased costs to support homelessness agencies, housing allowances and expenses relating to the rent, staffing, cleaning, personal protective equipment and food for a self-isolation center;
- **Children's Services:** Loss of parent fee revenue due to closure of regionally operated child care centres;
- **Seniors' Services:** Increased cleaning, staffing, security and personal protective equipment costs; and
- **Technology Services:** Additional costs relating to increased licenses to ensure sufficient capacity for staff working remotely.

Other estimated savings across multiple services and departments include:

- **Labour related savings:** not filling non-essential vacant positions.
- **Fuel:** Short/medium term savings due to significant drop in world oil and local fuel prices.
- **Niagara Regional Transit/Niagara Specialized Transit:** reduction in daily service schedules resulting from decreased demand will result in significant savings;

- **Non-emergency maintenance work:** limiting work at NRH owned units to emergencies and move-outs;
- **Operational savings:** reduced travel, meeting expenses, and conferences due to travel restrictions and cancelled events.

COVID-19 is causing an unprecedented amount of uncertainty and volatility in financial markets. Federal governments around the world are responding through both monetary policy (e.g. through the lowering of interest rates) and fiscal policy (e.g. by introducing spending and tax relief measures for residents and businesses). The impact of these measures is not yet known and as a result there is the possibility of major longer term impacts depending on the duration and severity of the pause in economic activity. The following items have been identified as potential costs or loss revenues, but have not been quantified in the analysis above due to uncertainty around them.

- **Cost of borrowing:** a lower cost of borrowing for planned 2020 debenture issues would lower the amount of debt servicing costs required in the 2021 budget;
- **Investment returns:** a lower investment rate would impact 2020 interest income and interest allocations to reserves. Also any cash flow challenges experienced as identified and discussed in CSD 31-2020 could further reduce interest income;
- **Property taxes:** the economic disruption could lead to a material increase in tax write-offs and lower net assessment growth for 2020 and into 2021;
- **Building Activity:** if construction activity is materially reduced, there would be a lower amount of supplementary taxes collected and lower assessment growth during the year and in future years. This would also lead to a reduced level of development charge collections, potentially impacting the Region's ability to fund growth-related capital projects, and potentially a reduction in development charge exemption costs;
- **Additional support to housing providers:** the economic disruption could lead to housing providers seeking additional support from NRH;
- **Recycling end markets:** the economic disruption could lead to volatility in prices for the sale of recyclables in waste management; and
- **Provincial gas tax:** the economic disruption could impact Niagara Regions gas tax allocation in 2021 and 2022 if we experience a greater decrease in ridership relative to other municipalities or if the total provincial gas tax collected declines due to less gas purchases.

In addition to the above, the Region is currently reviewing all capital projects and determining if any project deferrals are appropriate. It is important to note that deferring capital projects does not result in direct savings that could be used to mitigate the current COVID-19 financial impacts. Most capital projects are funded from previous contributions to reserves or debt issuance. The deferral of capital projects will strengthen the Region's cash flow position as further discussed in CSD 31-2020.

Funding announcements

The Region has also received announcements for three confirmed funding sources identified below. Review of the eligible cost criteria with this funding is underway and restrictions do apply. The team is looking for ways to fully leverage this funding and it is expected to support some costs that occur after our June 30, 2020 cost projection period identified above.

Description	Funding Agency	Amount
Community Homelessness Prevention Initiative *	Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing	\$2,408,100
Reaching Home Funding *	Employment and Social Development Canada	1,253,271
Long-term Care Emergency Funding	Ministry of Long-term Care	600,000
		<u>\$4,261,371</u>
* Incremental funding to cover full fiscal year of April 1, 2020 to March 31, 2021		

While no formal funding announcements have been made, the Province has indicated that it plans to work with municipalities to support Children's Service operations to minimize shortfalls.

Ontario Works also expects to see a substantial increase in subsidy claim payments to Ontario Works clients based on Provincial announcements. This increase will be directly offset by additional funding from the Province.

Additionally the Province has announced it plans to defer further reductions to the public health funding formula in 2021.

Budget Implications

As previously mentioned the full magnitude of the financial implications for the COVID-19 emergency on the Niagara Region's 2020 budget is not yet known. With that said, staff do expect the impact will require a gross budget adjustment that will exceed \$1 million requiring Council approval.

In order to avoid multiple adjustments and approvals, staff recommend that a budget adjustment will be completed once impacts, including funding announcements, are more clearly understood.

Should a funding shortfall materialize after all additional funding and cost mitigation strategies have been exhausted, Council could consider:

- An in-year budget amendment in accordance with the Budget Control Bylaw to draw on the Taxpayer Relief Reserve. This would require giving public notice.
- Making a recommendation through the year-end transfer report as per the Operating Surplus/Deficit Policy.

The decision on which approach would be recommended by staff will depend on the timing and magnitude of the required adjustment. Staff hope to be able to more fully outline the potential adjustment with the completion of the Q2 financial update report.

Staff will continue to provide Council with financial impact information in the weekly COVID-19 memo and will report back with a formal report outlining the budget adjustment prior to its completion.

Procurement Process

The Region has leveraged its existing Procurement By-law where appropriate to secure goods and services that are critical to our response to COVID-19. These purchases have utilized the special circumstance provision, which provides for both:

- an event that is exceptional or could not be foreseen and is likely to pose a threat to the health, safety or welfare of the public
- an emergency as defined in the *Emergency Management and Civil Protection Act*, R.S.O. 1990, c. E.9, as amended, or any successor legislation thereto

At the time of writing this report, the Region has executed 12 special circumstance purchases over \$10,000 for a total value of \$1.3 million. These purchases consist mainly of personal protective equipment, cleaning supplies/services, emergency shelter, and screening services. Staff will continue to rely on the special circumstance provisions in the procurement by-law on an as-required basis and report back to Council as needed.

Alternatives Reviewed

Staff are working with both the area municipality treasurers within Niagara Region and with colleagues across the province (through the Ontario Regional and Single-Tier Treasurers group) to share ideas and strategies to respond to the financial and operational impacts of this pandemic.

