



## **MEMORANDUM**

**CHR 2 - 2020**

**Subject: COVID-19 Government Relations Strategy**

**Date: April 23, 2020**

**To: Regional Chair and Members of Council**

**From: Daryl Barnhart, Executive Officer to the Regional Chair**

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In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the federal and provincial governments have developed a number of different programs designed to support individuals and businesses. While these measures were designed to provide much-needed relief to these groups, announcements of wide-spread support for municipalities have yet to be specified. As Regional and Local Area Municipal (LAM) staff continue to assess the full financial impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak, it has already become clear that substantial financial relief will be needed to maintain municipal service levels (as detailed in CSD-30 - 2020 and CSD-31 - 2020). Without any such support from senior levels of government, the potential outcomes include prolonged service level reductions and/or significant property tax and rate increases.

It is paramount that the Niagara Region, in close partnership with the 12 Local Area Municipalities, leverage pre-existing relationships with other levels of governments and municipal organizations to identify opportunities for the mitigation of financial hardships, as well as strategies to secure this support at an accelerated pace.

Given the wide-spread impact of COVID-19 on all municipalities, it is crucial that Niagara be coordinated, consistent and bold in our requests in order to stand out among other jurisdictions.

To this end, the following high-level government relations activities are being recommended:

1. Ensure sufficient coordination, consistency & cooperation between the Region and LAMs
2. Develop an accurate and reliable projection of the impacts of COVID-19
3. Take advantage of formal consultation opportunities with the provincial government
4. Align an advocacy approach with municipal stakeholder groups (i.e. AMO, FCM, etc.)
5. Maintain strong working two-way relationships with our local federal MPs and provincial MPPs

### **Ensure regional coordination and consistency**

Ensuring the Region and Niagara's Local Area Municipalities are unified in any requests being brought forward to the senior levels of government will be vital. It is also critical that the Region and local municipalities present a consistent view on shared priorities as well as potential solutions. Conflicting opinions or requests coming from Niagara may dilute our request and potentially have negative impacts on our ability to secure funding.

### **Development of an accurate picture of COVID-19 impacts**

It is strongly recommended that the Region, in close partnership with the 12 municipalities, work together to develop accurate short, medium and long-term impacts of COVID-19. Being able to accurately determine these figures will be a key element in ensuring we are seeking what we require from other levels of government. This data will provide an objective and factual underpinning that will be used as part of all related Government Relations activities related to the pandemic.

In discussions with provincial ministries, the Region has made commitments that whatever figures are brought forward will be accurate, straightforward and veracious. It is also worth noting that these impacts will not be limited to financial provisions as attention will also be paid to social and health considerations.

### **Take advantage of formal provincial consultation opportunities**

On April 9, the Provincial Government announced that Rod Phillips, Minister of Finance, will be chairing a new Ontario Jobs and Recovery Committee. This committee has been mandated to develop a plan to stimulate economic growth and job creation in the weeks and months ahead. As part of its work, it will be consulting with a wide variety of people to assess the impact of COVID-19 on the provincial economy and develop an action plan to move forward, including business associations, chambers of commerce, municipal leaders, corporate leaders, small business owners, and entrepreneurs.

The Region and the local area municipalities should be prepared for these consultations. Delivering reliable, strong projections on the financial impacts will be essential in presenting a holistic view on the region's challenging economic situation and the financial difficulties confronting its municipalities.

Regional staff will be reaching out to their municipal counterparts to explore the initiation of a formal coordinated approach to these consultations. Based on previous experience with provincial decision makers, it would be beneficial to ensure that any submissions through this process are consistent and Niagara presents a unified front.

### **Alignment with municipal stakeholder groups and counterparts**

While there are certain aspects to Niagara that make the region unique, it is also fair to assume that all municipalities across Ontario, and arguably Canada, will require additional operational funding from other levels of government.

Frequent collaboration with other municipal associations has, and will continue to offer significant insights into the approaches taken by municipalities across Ontario and Canada. These connections strengthen Niagara Region's voice among its municipal counterparts and frequent consultation and engagement help ensure that we will be "in step" with our counterparts. It is our view that the Region should remain aligned with the positions being adapted by these organizations as there will be "strength in numbers".

Strategic alignment with the following groups will continue to be paramount:

- **Association of Municipalities of Ontario** – AMO's long-standing relationship and MOU with the Province of Ontario will help position its membership, including the Region, to have a strong voice with decision makers at Queen's Park. AMO is currently working closely with the Ontario Job and Recovery Committee to ensure the needs of municipalities are being heard.
- **Federation of Canadian Municipalities** – FCM has been working diligently to advocate for a municipal relief package from the federal government, focused primarily on highlighting the need for direct financial assistance to local governments to provide some immediate relief and allow essential services to keep operating. The Region will continue to work with FCM to ensure Niagara is contributing to this conversation.
- **MARCO / LUMCO** – These groups, representing the large urban mayors and regional chairs across Ontario, have been having ongoing discussions with Municipal Affairs and Housing to explore options to mitigate economic and social impacts of COVID-19 on municipalities. As members of the Mayors and Regional Chairs of Ontario (MARCO), the Region has gained insight into potential policy directions that the Province may (or may not) undertake to alleviate some of the financial pressures experienced by municipalities.
- **Counterparts across Ontario** – As members of the Ontario Regional and Single-Tier Treasurers and the Municipal Finance Officers Association (MFOA), Regional staff has the opportunity to consult with municipal counterparts regarding the financial impact the pandemic has on municipalities, possible relief measures that can be provided to communities, and potential strategies for refining new budget realities arising from the costs for managing the pandemic.

### **Maintain strong two-way relationships with federal and provincial MPs**

Staff have been in constant contact with local MPPs and MPs to share pertinent information and ensure key messages regarding the management of the pandemic are aligned and communicated effectively to the public. Particularly, staff have participated in extensive discussions with MPP Sam Oosterhoff to illustrate the impact the outbreak is having on the region and how the Province can support the region in resolving critical issues that have emerged since the Provincial Emergency Declaration.

### **Conclusion**

Provided there is support from Regional Council for the recommended high-level activities outlined in this memo, Regional staff will begin to actively reach out to local counterparts to develop a more fulsome strategy with the input of all stakeholders.

Moving forward, staff will continue to work with other municipalities and levels of government to find creative solutions to challenges, and opportunities to strengthen the region through recovery initiatives. As stimulus programs, grants, and other funding initiatives surface, government relations staff will connect the Region, local area municipalities, and the community to these funding opportunities.

Respectfully submitted and signed by

Original signed by:

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*Prepared in consultation is Gina van den Burg, Government & Stakeholder Relations Specialist; Helen Chamberlain, Director of Financial Management & Planning/Deputy Treasurer; and Todd Harrison, Commissioner of Corporate Services/Regional Treasurer*