

Mayor Rob Keffer's Keynote Speech

Mayor's Annual Business Breakfast – December 11, 2015

I am pleased to speak here this morning in front of business owners. The Board of Trade plays an important role in promoting our Town.

374 days.

That's how long it's been since I had the honour to be sworn in as mayor of my hometown Bradford West Gwillimbury.

The year has gone quickly, with a hectic pace. I feel like I have been 'on the run' a lot of the time. But looking back, an intense and rewarding year.

There can always be challenges that jump up in front of you. Shortly after the start of my term in Dec, I heard of the closing of the Rotodale Nursery School on Barrie St. But you set up meetings, use your contacts at the county of Simcoe, and be patient, and sure enough, another service provider took over the program and a great child learning experience continues on Barrie St.

And then there was the snow storm of Dec 10. Our Town's staff and equipment couldn't keep up to the day long snow fall, so many residential streets took too long to get cleared. But you learn from this experience, ask for evaluations and staff reports, and make changes so we are better prepared. And we are. We have a Winter Operations Plan in place now that sets the standards we expect.

But you also have some pleasant surprises and positive outcomes.

One of the first things we did at a Council meeting was to allow overnight parking on New Year's Eve. A small thing, but meant to show we understand the frustration of parking restrictions, know the importance of celebrating with friends, and that drinking and driving don't mix. We have expanded that this year to include free public transit from 5p.m. to 3 a.m. And on Tues is a staff report to see about options for other overnight parking solutions when friends are visiting for the holidays.

But looking back, on the evening of my inauguration, I outlined three key principles that should guide Town Council.

First, Town Council will be collaborative, consultative, respectful and transparent.

Second, ensuring we operate with the highest respect for your tax dollars.

And third, that Council and staff will work hard on your behalf to enact an ambitious agenda to build a better town for all areas of town.

This morning, I want to discuss with you how we have sought to stay true to those three principles and then outline the progress we have made towards achieving our ambitious agenda.

ACCOUNTABLE, TRANSPARENT GOVERNANCE

Town Council is far more positive, productive and collaborative than it was previously. We work hard together as a team. We may not always agree, but we have good discussions at the Council table and we respect where everyone is coming from.

And we have a hard working Council, with many more extra meetings than in years past.

We have started CAN meetings (Community Access Network Meetings) so that you can speak directly to your councillor, Deputy Mayor Leduc and myself, and someone from South Simcoe Police.

We have hosted forums to engage artists and environmentalists in our Town, and work with BWG Diversity to ensure an inclusive community that celebrates our diversity.

We have an amazing 12 committees where we have local citizens involved in our Town's development. Our committees are hard at work to make a difference in their expert areas, and taking the initiative to make positive change happen.

As a Council, we're accessible. I'm sure you've heard the old saying: "If a tree falls in the forest, does anyone hear it?"

Well, I have a modern reply for the digital age: "If there's no photo on Facebook, did it even happen?"

I have to admit I'm surprised and pleased at how social media is a big part of the "community bulletin board". But we as Council have had to learn and respond to the social media requirements.

This kind of accessibility and transparency is important to good governance; it's also important to help build community.

I've been pleased to see how our Council has taken transparency and accessibility to heart, with a more positive and collaborative tone that respects the voices of the voters.

RESPECT FOR TAX DOLLARS

I am pleased and proud with the work we have done together as a Council to ensure taxes stay as low as possible while still investing to build a better Town.

In January of this year, we worked on the 2015 budget and came away with a .59% tax increase, the second lowest in 10 years. But we were back at it last month preparing for the 2016 Budget. As a Council we worked hard to come up with a municipal increase of .48% and an expected combined tax increase of 1.77

That will average just 1.2% over 2 years.

Because I know how important, as business people, you require fiscal efficiencies.

And we have kept our promise to keep taxes as low as possible without cutting services.

On the contrary, we have continued to invest in the services we all rely on and enjoy.

Last year at the Inauguration of Council, I said, “Budgeting is about balancing affordability and our goals, so we grow in a smart way, and in a way that benefits all parts of town, while keeping taxes as low as possible.”

We have continued to invest to build a better Town for all parts of Town – more for road rehabilitation, more for sidewalks, more for urban forestry, more for parks. And we have made strategic hires – improve safety, and efficiencies.

We’ve held the line on spending by being smart with where we invest.

We’ve listened to the real experts – you, the citizens of Town.

AMBITIOUS AGENDA—Build a Better Town:

The first two principles I just discussed are important in terms of creating the circumstances in which we can best achieve our goals.

The third ingredient is hard work, from Council and from staff.

Residents expect their councillors to work hard for them, to be accountable and accessible. And our Council is!

I appreciate how hard our Councillors are working – the number of Committees is just one example.

Residents expect the same of staff.

As Mayor, I am the Town’s CEO. A key part of that role is ensuring staff is working hard and effectively alongside Council to enact our goals. That is why our Strategic Planning Session was so important.

On seniors’ housing, I see an early success.

In September, I stood with Reverend Dr Scott and Dale Béasse from Bekerman Properties to announce a proposed 130-unit seniors’ housing facility.

Not only would such a facility bring construction jobs to Town, once built and at full capacity, the facility projects employing around 80 people, from nurses to food service to drivers.

I also remain committed to delivering housing for everyone. There are other opportunities arising for development, with hopefully announcements soon.

Job creation is another core priority. You have heard this morning about our CIP programs, and our economic development strategy. And Council is committed to do whatever it takes to bring jobs. I am excited about our Economic Development Advisory Committee, where we will have a team working together to bring economic activity.

I am impressed by what a difference our CIP has done to improve the Downtown.

Just recently, we purchased the old Bradford High School and are exploring ways to convert this heritage building into a resource for our community.

And we are working hard to recognize our heritage.

I want to thank our Heritage Committee for their leadership. There may have been bumps along the way, but we have made a great leap forward in heritage awareness and will take the lessons learnt to heart to improve future processes.

Even as we improve Town with housing options, job creation and heritage protection, we know we have to do more to improve commuting.

I am excited by the province's promise of all-day, 2 Way GO train service over the next decade, with increased service expected in the interim five years.

Similarly, after years of big promises and no progress, we finally have an action plan to bring jobs to Highway 400, with the Town taking the lead to get sewers to Hwy 88 to start job creation at the interchange there from a position of strength.

And, critically, we have united local mayors, York Region and Simcoe County to push for the Hwy 400-404 Connecting Link, formerly called the Bradford Bypass.

We have plans to use our combined influence to get this critical infrastructure project back on the books at Queen's Park. I hope to have more to say on this soon.

Jobs and commuting are two sides of the same coin, and we are working hard to address both. Progress is being made behind the scenes, and I am optimistic for tangible results in the coming year.

Finally, whether with plans for the new Henderson Park, and application to build cycling infrastructure along the Canals, investments in our tree canopy and parks, Council has made great strides towards beautification and environmental protection.

My monthly column in the Bradford Topic outlines Council's environmental initiatives in more detail, but let me just say today that we are doing our bit to fight climate change

and protect our planet, by investing in transit, in our tree canopy, in streetlight retrofitting and much more.

More still, our environmental initiatives are also good for our budget, as we save money and cut down on greenhouse-gas emissions at the same time.

We have made great progress this year.

MORE TO DO

But there is much, much more to do.

If there is one message I have to share with you today as we look back on the first year for this new Council, it is that we have made a strong start..

Whether through concrete action, plans made, relationships formed with other levels of government or by empowering residents, Council has made a strong start, and we look forward to the year ahead.

And, I want to acknowledge and thank the Bradford Board of Trade for the incredible work you've done this year.

I think it is safe to say that the Board of Trade has had a banner year, with fantastic events and programs.

Bradford West Gwillimbury is a great place to live, and it is getting even better. We have a new Council that respects your tax dollars, works collaboratively and respectfully, and works hard on your behalf.

A year later, I remain inspired by our community and dedicated to building a better town for all parts of Town, with your help.

Thank you so much for this opportunity to update you on the progress we are making together.

Merry Christmas, and Happy Holidays, to you and yours!