

TOWNSHIP OF STIRLING-RAWDON

MUNICIPAL MODERNIZATION

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INTRODUCTION

Jewell Engineering Inc, was engaged by the Township Stirling-Rawdon to undertake a review of the current municipal development approval process. The purpose of the review was to identify where and how efficiencies and cost savings could be realized.

In recent years, the Township of Stirling-Rawdon has experienced a significant increase in new housing development. It is well known that inefficiencies and delays in the approval process are costly, both as an expenditure and as lost revenue, for municipalities. These costs are reflected through,

- Impacts on the local economy,
- Shortfall of housing options,
- Lost/deferred property tax revenue,
- Excessive amounts of municipal staff time to assist potential developers and review development applications.

In order to assist with, and continue to attract development, the Township would like to standardize its development approval process to reduce costs and timelines. This will ensure informed development and that planning timelines are met.

Currently, planning responsibilities for the Township of Stirling-Rawdon are split between the County of Hastings and the Township of Stirling-Rawdon. Responsibilities are as set out below;

<u>Township of Stirling-Rawdon</u>	<u>County of Hastings</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Zoning By-law amendment	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Official Plan Amendment
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Minor Variance	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Draft Plan of Subdivision
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Site Plan Control Approval	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Land Severance (Consent)
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Draft Plan of Condominium

The review did not necessarily consider the approval process of the upper tier although it is recognized that improvements in the lower tier review process will be reflected in the upper tier process. Findings and recommendations are provided on the Township's review of the planning aspects for which it is responsible, including review of components subject to County authority.

The current Township planning approval process generally abides the accepted critical steps in municipal planning;

1. Identification and conveyance of Municipal Expectations
2. Consultation
3. Application
4. Conditional Approval
5. Final Approval

There is an opportunity to improve the efficiency of this process which will translate into cost savings for the Municipality and developers.

CONSIDERED EXPENDITURES

As part of the review, all costs typically associated with the development approval process were considered including;

- Municipal staff time
- Legal fees
- Consulting fees (including peer review)

Actual costs associated with development approval cannot be stated due to the unique nature of each development. The complexity of the project will ultimately dictate the municipal cost associated with the approval. Instead, cost savings were considered in the light of a reduced level of effort for municipal staff and associated professionals.

FINDINGS

Areas of Concern

Currently, there are several tools missing from the municipal toolbox that would maximize the assistance that can be provided to developers and help expedite the application process. A primary concern of the Municipality is its lack of a fulsome development application package that includes information such as municipal expectations and greater direction on the application process.

The concept of municipal expectations is applied in the broader sense to include tools and information such as a general understanding of the Township's vision, application process decision matrix, background studies and municipal standards.

Although developers have every opportunity to consult with the Township regarding potential developments, these consultations lack structure due to the relatively undefined nature of the application process. As a result, meetings may not be as productive as they could be and more meetings than necessary may be required.

Municipal Expectations

The vision for the Township will continue to crystallize as the Township updates its Strategic Plan. Once a growth strategy has been defined, this information can be made available, in various detail, to the public, to assist land developers with their development plans.

Several other key elements that would help clarify municipal expectations were also found to be in need of updating.

Decision Matrix

Without a step-by-step guideline, developers, with or without experience, may find it challenging to navigate the application process. This can lead to delays in the application and may require additional staff time.

Municipal Standards

The absence of information prior to beginning the development process can lead to unexpected costs for developers and the Municipality.

Consultation

Although most applicants consult with the Municipality when making an application, pre-consultation is not necessarily a mandatory step in the process. A lack of informed consultation can lead to delays in the application, additional staff time and increased costs to all parties.

Application

Lack of understanding of what a complete application is to include can lead to multiple submissions, increased staff time and increased costs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Municipal Expectations

As part of the Township growth strategy, background information such as infrastructure and transportation studies, may be completed and made available to the public. Determination of which studies are required will be made by the Township as part of the update to the Strategic Plan. All studies will help clarify municipal requirements and better inform developers. However, additional information can be provided while the Township continues to update its vision for future development.

Decision Matrix

Preparation of a simple, flow chart type of decision matrix would simplify the process of determining the correct application(s) for the proposed development. This would be helpful to municipal staff and potential developers resulting in reduced staff time and costs.

Municipal Standards

The Township has a good understanding of its existing infrastructure and this will be bolstered by the completion of the Strategic Plan and associated growth strategy. This information will help inform minimum standards for road, water and wastewater infrastructure. The Township should focus on developing standards to ensure appropriate, consistent and informed development.

Another aspect of municipal standards as they relate to development are the agreements associated with each type of development. Although each development is unique, some standardization of these agreements can be attained. This will reduce staff time and the legal costs associated with preparing completely new agreements for each development.

Development of municipal standards will also reduce municipal costs through decreased staff time needed to assist with and review applications.

Consultation

With clearly defined municipal expectations and supporting information, pre-consultation can be a very productive and informative step in the application process. In conjunction with the development of the supporting/background information, both the Township and developers would benefit from pre-consultation.

Implementation of mandatory pre-consultation would reduce municipal and developer costs, by reducing the number of incomplete or incorrect submissions, and ensure prescribed review timelines are met.

Application

Application Checklist

A checklist of items and/or tasks that need to accompany each type of application would help developers navigate the application process and better inform them of development requirements. These items could include supplement studies such as traffic impact studies, soils investigations and ecological assessments. An understanding of what is required will help expedite approvals and reduce the time required to allow development to proceed.

Municipal staff will also benefit from an application checklist. Understanding what is required for a complete application will empower staff to have informed discussion with developers and reduce the number of submissions and staff time.

Technology

As part of a modernization of the municipal development application review, technology provides many opportunities to streamline the process.

Many of the development applications are currently available for download from the municipal website. Consideration should be given to providing fillable forms and the ability to submit applications and supporting documents online. This would only be the first step in digital submissions and there are many paths that can be taken and different options available for consideration.

As the County of Hastings has planning authority for several development approvals, any consideration for digital submissions would have to be in conjunction with the upper tier or be limited to the planning components for which the Township is responsible.

IMPLEMENTATION

As a result of the current local economic environment, the Township is experiencing a significantly higher volume of residential development compared to historical numbers. This, coupled with staff turnover in recent years, at both the upper and lower tier, has revealed some inefficiencies in the review process.

The Township follows the generally accepted process for development approvals and the pragmatic recommendations of this report do not suggest an overhaul of the current process.

However, implementation of some, or all, of the recommendations as quickly as possible would greatly benefit municipal staff and potential developers.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

With the implementation of the recommendations, it is expected that the allocation of municipal staff and financial resources to the approval process will be significantly reduced.

With clearer direction and more information available to local developers, it will be easier to independently navigate the approval process and frontline staff will have the support and understanding that allows them to provide informed guidance to potential developers. Expected outcomes include;

- Reduced staff time (leading to reduced municipal costs)
 - Fewer submissions from developers
 - More complete/correct submissions from developers
 - Less time required to review submissions
- Increased efficiency (by municipal staff) during approval process
 - Thorough knowledge of submission requirements
- Reduced legal fees
- Reduced consulting fees

It is difficult to quantify the savings associated with the implementation of the recommendations as it will depend on the developers as well as municipal staff. However, it is not unreasonable to expect that the municipality will realize a 20%-40% reduction in the effort required by municipal staff during the development approval process.

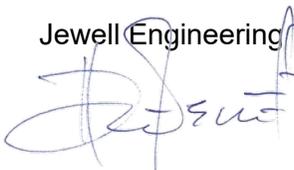
CONCLUSIONS

This review considered typical municipal approval best practices and pragmatic solutions to help improve the current process. Recommendations should be used to assist the Township with developing and implementing best practices and/or strategies to suit the local environment.

As the Township continues to grow, these practices should be reviewed and updated to ensure municipal approvals are being processed quickly and efficiently.

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