

Meeting Date: August 8, 2023
Department: Building, By-law and Planning Department
Report No.: BBP-2023-98
Submitted by: Jennifer Huff, Director, Building & Planning
Approved by: William (Bill) Dakin, Director of Finance, IT/Treasurer & Acting CAO

SUBJECT: Hiring Request – Planning Assistant

RECOMMENDATION: THAT: Council receive Report BBP-2023-98 for information; and THAT: Council direct staff to begin the recruitment process for a Planning Assistant.

STRATEGIC PLAN ALIGNMENT:

This matter is in accord with the following strategic priorities:

Growth Management: Strathroy-Caradoc will be an inclusive community where growth is managed to accommodate a range of needs and optimize municipal resources.

Customer Services: The Municipality offers seamless, responsive service and an exceptional experience for every customer.

BACKGROUND:

Planning Staff have continued to be challenged to maintain appropriate service levels in response to both increasing levels of planning inquiries/pre-consultations and applications and changing provincial legislation that increases planning responsibilities while at the same time imposing fee refunds if deadlines are not met.

To date, staff have been successful at meeting these challenges due to the employment of a contracted co-op student that has worked in the department for approximately 1 ½ years. This contract is scheduled to end September 27th 2023 and will not be further extended.

The extent of the student's role has expanded significantly over time due to the student's capacity and staff's need for additional support. Typical co-op terms are 4 or 8 month contracts and while continuing with a student contract would provide some additional support, it could not provide the breadth of assistance the department has come to depend on in order to meet customer service levels as well as legislative timelines / deadlines.

A list of roles and responsibilities currently being completed by the student position includes, but is not limited to:

- Tracking / linking planning approval dates for zoning, subdivision and site plan approval applications to development charge by-laws as is now required by recent amendments to the Development Charge Act
- Preparation, attending and taking planning pre-consultation meeting minutes to be issued to the applicant
- Assisting in planning application intake, file tracking and inquiries
- Mapping in support of special projects by various departments (Fire, Economic Development, Museum, Planning)
- Mapping projects in support of the sale / purchase of industrial land and agreements of purchase and sale
- Landscaping design details in support of the Community Services Department
- Special project research (street name policy, census data, climate change)
- Creating building permit dashboard to track location and type of building permits by date and can be used internally and by the public
- Creating a planning application dashboard to track location and type of planning applications by date and can be used internally and by the public
- File assistance to County Staff without access to local files
- Providing background information for committee of adjustment planning reports
- Development of planning, building and by-law guidelines, on-line how-to brochures, CIP FAQ's
- Preparation and circulation of planning notices
- Completion of quarterly building reports

While current full-time staff are currently responsible for some of these activities, due to the general increase in workload and the increasing interest in CIP applications, the capacity of existing positions to maintain service levels is being significantly challenged. As well, the department strives to maintain a certain level of redundancy amongst staff in order to maintain customer service levels and legislative timelines during vacations, sick days and any other unexpected staff leaves. The student position has provided the necessary support to ensure all of these projects and responsibilities can be completed on time. It is also noted that some of the work being completed only being done by the student position (i.e. mapping / dashboard work) and when the contract ends, this work will end unless the position is replaced.

COMMENTS:

In support of the request for this hire, staff note that the 2023 budget was approved to include the cost of a new full-time position. It is also noted that notwithstanding the heavy planning application load and all of the changes to the planning legislation that primarily impacts local municipalities, the County has not indicated an intent to approve a budget increase for an increased staff level to assist local municipalities manage these changes.

Further, if the updated Provincial Planning Statement (which is anticipated to be in place by the end of 2023) provides additional opportunities for rural severances and reduces the criteria for settlement boundary changes, staff anticipate a significant increase in all types of planning applications. Without a planning assistant, there will be a direct negative impact to the level of customer service and support that will be available not only for the planning department but a number of other departments in the Municipality. It may also result in the Municipality losing planning revenue as it may have to refund planning fees if timelines are not able to be met.

Maintaining an appropriate level of planning support is critical to the Municipality's ability to provide an excellent level of customer service to existing and future residents, developers and investors thereby allowing us to stand apart from competitors and respond to development opportunities as quickly as possible.

CONSULTATION:

The Director of HR and Finance was consulted in preparation of this report.

Staff would be receptive to the position being a two-year contract.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS:

None

ATTACHMENTS:

None