

Letter to the Editor

The Lamont Leader and Vegreville News-Advertiser recently reported on an advocacy group, where some allegations were made against Lamont County Council and Administration. I would like to acknowledge and address concerns related to this and raised in other media, including reporting on a meeting held by some County residents on December 15th where allegations were made against Lamont County Council and Administration, suggesting inflated staffing costs, dishonesty, and frustration with proposed changes to the *Land Use Bylaw*.

In regard to staffing costs, budgeting of salaries and wages for future years is determined based on approved levels of service and the staffing required to deliver services. Other factors influencing staffing costs include: approved positions; salary ranges determined by an independent third-party compensation study conducted in 2022; a resulting compensation policy approved by Council; and an approved cost of living adjustment. This helps ensure Lamont County is able to attract and retain staff critical to serving residents in a very competitive labour market.

When we compare planned salaries to prior year actual salaries, it is clear that we have encountered some staff turnover and prolonged vacancies. This has led to year end surpluses in salary and wages, and in some cases higher than anticipated expenditures in contracted services. At the end of the day, surpluses are channeled to Reserves and help reduce tax increases in subsequent years.

Under the *Municipal Government Act* (MGA), each municipality is required to prepare annual financial statements that are audited by an independent Chartered Professional Accounting (CPA) Firm. Salary costs are significant expenditures for all municipalities. As such auditors spend considerable time reviewing these costs to ensure that information is presented accurately. Of note, Lamont County received “clean” audit results annually over the past number of years.

Administration is revisiting calculation of salaries and wages and where necessary, will bring this forward for Council to review any required adjustments in the preparation of the *Property Tax Bylaw*.

With respect to allegations of dishonesty, Council is not aware of any situations and works hard to ensure disciplined practices, and to follow procedures, bylaws, the MGA. On January 9 as part of input into the annual audit, Councillors unanimously supported a letter to the auditors confirming that they are aware of no known fraud. If anyone is aware of any specific situation, please contact me or your Councillor and the matter will be investigated.

Council continues to work on the *Land Use Bylaw*. After a number of open houses and an initial public hearing we invited residents to forward letters of concern to Council. Based on the letters received, we decided to hold another Public Hearing on August 15, 2023. The recording of the meeting has been transcribed and Council will use this transcription and all letters received by May 15th at a workshop next month. Council will look to address residents' concerns and make any required adjustments to ensure the *Land Use Bylaw* meets the needs of both residents and Council.

This Bylaw is important for Lamont County and a requirement of the MGA. Amendments will seek to balance the needs of residents and industry and to ensure Lamont County is competitive.

All industrial proponents must pay Offsite Levies to fund improvements to infrastructure surrounding their development. In response to allegations of providing a loan to industry, rest assured no money was advanced to an industrial partner. An agreement was established allowing the investor to pay its offsite levy over time. This is shown as a "loan receivable" on the Financial Statements and is allowed under the MGA (Section 648(1)(b)). This helped ensure the development landed in Lamont County and has resulted in a solid revenue source today and into the future. The receivable appears on the asset side of the balance sheet and is being paid back. We are collecting money owed to Lamont County - it is not an unsecured loan.

Regarding comments about a recent recall petition, suffice it to say that all was completed in accordance with legislation, under the supervision of legal counsel and to the satisfaction of the Minister of Municipal Affairs.

I acknowledge residents' concerns and felt these matters needed to be clarified. If you have any questions around these or other items, please contact me, any Councillor or Administration. We are happy to clear up any misinformation and hear your concerns.

Thank you,
David Diduck, Reeve,
on behalf of Lamont County Council