

Report to Strategic Priorities and Policy Committee

To: Chair and Members
Strategic Priorities and Policy Committee
From: Lynne Livingstone, City Manager
Subject: COVID-19 Ongoing impacts on City of London operations and services
Date: September 20, 2022

Recommendation

That, on the recommendation of the City Manager, the report dated September 20, 2022, entitled “Covid-19 – Ongoing Impacts on City of London Operations and Services” **BE RECEIVED** for information.

Executive Summary

When COVID-19 first emerged in the London area at the beginning of 2020, there were significant impacts on City operations and services. These impacts continued throughout 2020 into the first quarter of 2022 when most of the remaining COVID-19 restrictions and precautions were lifted by Provincial and local health officials.

Although most City of London programs and services are fully operational, there are ongoing impacts of COVID-19. The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the ways these ongoing impacts continue to affect City of London operations, programs, and services.

Analysis

1.0 Background Information

1.1 Previous Reports Related to this Matter

Strategic Priorities and Policy Committee, meeting on June 23, 2020, Agenda Item 2.1 - COVID-19 - City of London Services.

<https://pub-london.escribemeetings.com/FileStream.ashx?DocumentId=73221>

Strategic Priorities and Policy Committee, meeting on September 22, 2020, Agenda Item 2.4 – City of London Fall Services

<https://pub-london.escribemeetings.com/FileStream.ashx?DocumentId=74819>

Strategic Priorities and Policy Committee, meeting on December 16, 2020, Agenda Item 2.2 – COVID-19 - City of London Services Update (Winter)

<https://pub-london.escribemeetings.com/filestream.ashx?DocumentID=74440>

Strategic Priorities and Policy Committee, meeting on April 27, 2021, Agenda Item 5.1 – COVID-19 – City of London Services Update

<https://pub-london.escribemeetings.com/filestream.ashx?DocumentId=80261>

2.0 Discussion and Considerations

The City's Approach

When COVID-19 first emerged as an issue, the City's response was guided by a set of principles. At the forefront has been the mission and values that have been set through Council's Strategic Plan for the organization.

Mission:

To be a responsive and modern public service partner that fosters change to build a better London for all.

Values:

Good governance
Driven by community
Acting with compassion
Moving forward with innovation

Guiding Principles:

Based on the mission and values, guiding principles were defined early in the City's process to respond to COVID-19. These principles served as the foundation for all that was done throughout the time the City's operations were significantly modified, and they continue to guide actions related to COVID-19. These principles include:

- Health and safety for residents and staff is a priority and is an ongoing commitment.
- Every effort will be made to minimize the harm to people and organizations impacted by decisions.
- Efforts to support economic recovery and those most vulnerable will be prioritized.
- A consistent, enterprise-wide approach will be taken.
- Communicating about service changes will be transparent, frequent, and ongoing.

Commitment to Health and Safety:

Throughout its response to COVID-19, the City has maintained an ongoing commitment to the health and safety of its employees and residents. This has been a priority through every stage of the COVID-19 response. Throughout all operations, health and safety precautions were incorporated, including efforts that allow for individual health screening upon entry of City facilities, appropriate personal protective equipment, physical distancing, frequent hand washing and hand sanitizing, and frequent sanitization of high touch areas.

Alignment with the Province and Local Public Health Guidance:

Throughout COVID-19, all actions taken at the municipal level have been aligned with the safety, recovery and restarting activities of the Province of Ontario. Decisions made at the Provincial level have had a direct impact on the City's operations. Staff will continue to monitor Provincial guidance and the guidance of local public health officials as we move into the fall to ensure that all actions taken at the Municipal level continue to be aligned with current health directives.

2.0 Current State:

Although most health precautions and restrictions have been lifted, ongoing impacts of the pandemic continue to be felt not only in London but in communities around the world. As well, new cases continue to be reported. Since December 31, 2021, PCR testing has been limited to individuals who live or work in highest risk settings, which means the cases that are reported underestimates the true number of people infected with COVID-19 in Middlesex-London. As of September 1, 2022, there were a total of 431 deaths reported in London and there were 684 active cases of COVID-19, with the total number of confirmed cases since the beginning of the pandemic having reached 41,938.

Throughout the pandemic, the Community Control Group met on a regular basis, with daily meetings in the initial phases, shifting to bi-weekly, and then to monthly meetings as health precautions continued to be lifted and the community experience stabilized. As well, the internal COVID-19 Working Group, consisting of City staff leading services and programs significantly impacted by COVID-19 or that were required to respond as circumstances changed, also shifted from meeting on a regular basis to meeting monthly and then as needed.

Like many organizations, City of London staff have experienced fatigue associated with constant change, as well as with the ongoing uncertainty of what future waves of COVID-19 may entail. Staff have demonstrated both resilience and agility as services were continually changing in earlier phases of the pandemic; however, this has not been without challenges. Throughout the pandemic, People Services has maintained a heightened focus on wellness, with the addition of programs and information to support self-care and well-being. As well, staff have been encouraged to take the vacation time that is allotted to them, and a Right to Disconnect Policy has been enacted to ensure that employees can disconnect outside of business hours.

Ongoing health precautions that continue to be in place in City facilities include:

- Self-assessment posters that encourage self screening prior to entering a City facility.
- Ongoing availability of hand sanitizer throughout City facilities.
- Use of plexiglass to support physical distancing where there is customer contact.
- Encouragement to wear a mask when working indoors and in close proximity with other staff members
- Mandatory Proof of COVID-19 Vaccination Administrative Policy

3.0 Ongoing Impacts

3.1 Staffing and Labour Shortages:

Like many organizations and other municipalities, the City has experienced some additional challenges in hiring and retaining staff as a result of COVID-19, especially for seasonal staff. As an example, despite enhanced recruitment efforts, both Parks Operations and Roadway Operations were unable to hire their full complement of temporary staff this year.

The Building Division and Planning and Development have also been impacted by staffing and labour shortages. Even with an intensive focus on hiring, the Planning and Development area has had a number of vacancies over the past 6 months. While vacancy rates have declined in the Building Division, there has been an impact on productivity as new employees are trained. It's expected that this will level off over the next several months as new staff are fully integrated and productivity increases.

Ongoing impacts on staffing and labour shortages not only impacted service areas that provide direct service to the community; they also impacted critical support services such as information technology services, facilities, people services and other corporate services that support the organization. These impacts are being felt enterprise wide.

Across the organization, and in the market in general, competition for talent has increased considerably. Candidates for many positions, whether internal or external candidates, usually have offers in hand and are comparing benefits and salary when they are contemplating an offer from the City. The ability to work remotely is often a factor in the decision to accept or decline a position as well. Through COVID-19, an additional impact has been an increase in the number of long-term staff who have made the decision to retire.

3.2 Service Delivery:

While we have returned to pre-pandemic service levels and program offerings across most City divisions, there are some ongoing impacts that affect the City's ability to fully deliver services. As an example, this summer, like many municipalities, there was a shortage of certified lifeguards, which meant swim programs were impacted. As well, recreation and community services that had been offered through the Carling Heights Optimist Community Centre continued to be impacted as this facility remained an assessment centre until late August, with maintenance and repairs required before it can fully re-open on October 6. Also, while we have seen registration numbers return to pre-pandemic levels, there may be some level of uncertainty or hesitation to participate in recreation and sport programs because of COVID-19. This will continue to be an unknown as we move into the fall, with the potential for a resurgence in case numbers.

The pandemic has been extremely difficult for individuals who are marginalized in London. Throughout COVID-19, there has been an increase in the number of people experiencing homelessness, addictions and episodic mental health challenges which has increased the demand for resources and staffing to support them. City staff are working with community organizations to identify ways to better deliver services, collectively and collaboratively, to those people who are marginalized in London.

3.3 Supply Chain:

City programs and services are also impacted by challenges experienced in the supply chain. As an example, the Green Bin packers have been delayed, which has meant the introduction of the Green Program will be delayed until the summer of 2023, with full program roll-out continuing into the fall as vehicles are delivered. As well, delivery of some playground replacement parts was delayed from the fall of 2021 to spring of 2023. Equipment replacement parts have also been delayed; one grass-cutting tractor has been out of commission because staff are awaiting parts.

Many capital construction materials have not been available as well. This has included signal and streetlight poles, pipes and other accessory materials, and most recently concrete due to cement shortages. As well, the landfill gas expansion at W12A Landfill was delayed while staff are waiting for appropriate materials.

Supply chain impacts have also resulted in contractors being hesitant to hold bid prices during the procurement period due to the risk of large cost fluctuations between bid submission and tender award.

The City's ability to implement pilot programs as part of the Master Accommodation Plan for Alternative Work Strategies has also been impacted by supply chain challenges, specifically, with delays in the delivery of furniture required to establish alternative workspaces.

There have also been significant impacts in supply chain within the Fire Department, including delays in the delivery of a respirator and filter apparatus, mechanical parts, bunker gear and station wear, defibrillator pads and batteries, tire availability and medical supplies.

3.4 Cost Escalation:

Across the organization, service areas have been impacted by cost increases in routinely purchased products. Some examples include the following:

- Almost doubling of costs for paint for outdoor sports facilities, fertilizer for golf courses and other facilities, and acrylic sport surfacing materials
- Increases in the cost of traffic paint, sign blanks and signposts
- Significant cost increases to equipment rentals for summer maintenance and winter road operations
- Increases in environmental items made from plastic and similar materials (e.g., Blue Boxes, home composters, reusable bags, etc.)
- Cost escalations impacting the Fire Department that include costs for mechanical fixes, apparatus and vehicles, all equipment and bunker gear.

The increased cost of living has placed pressure on household budgets which is beginning to impact collective bargaining agreements throughout the Province, as well as salary expectations for new hires in London.

The City has also experienced significant capital cost increases in 2022 and expect this to continue, which will impact tenders and RFPs well into 2023. The continued impact of cost increases on capital projects may require reprioritization or recalibrating of current capital budgets.

These impacts on operating and capital, and Civic Administration's plans to address them, are further outlined in the 2022 Mid-Year Operating Budget Monitoring Report (section 4.2) and 2022 Mid-Year Capital Budget Monitoring Report (section 2.1) which

also appear on the September 20, 2022, Strategic Priorities and Policy Committee agenda.

3.5 Private and Not-for-Profit Sector Labour Shortages:

In addition to labour shortages affecting retention and recruitment at the City directly, this is also having an impact on our ability to contract private sector organizations, primarily construction, and the length of time that is being estimated to complete projects. There have also been labour impacts in the not-for-profit sector as well. Some examples include the following:

- Some landscape projects are being estimated to take between two and three months longer to start and many companies are hesitant to provide a definitive schedule
- There are fewer responses and response times are slower to the general equipment rental tender for operations work
- Labour for recycling pickup and processing at recycling facility must now include incentives to attract employees
- Staff have also had to cancel tenders because of lack of bids; others have proceeded after only a single bid was received and a better outcome after re-tendering was unlikely
- Not-for-profit organizations have been impacted by the increased demands on their frontline staff. As well, City staff continue to work with community-based service providers to use SSRF funding to mitigate any impacts because of reduced or modified daytime and overnight spaces for those experiencing homelessness

4.0 Enhancements resulting from COVID-19

While the pandemic has resulted in a number of challenges, some of which will continue to have a long-term impact on the City, there are also a number of learnings that have been applied to services and programs that have enhanced the organization's capabilities. Overall, staff have demonstrated a high level of resilience, as well as innovation, creativity, flexibility, and agility in responding to what was ever-changing modifications to many programs and services.

Throughout the pandemic, the internal COVID-19 Working Group demonstrated the value of working enterprise-wide. This approach has continued and is now at the heart of how we operate, supported in part through a reorganization that strengthened this enterprise-wide focus.

Use of technology has been enhanced, with several adjustments required through COVID-19. The ability to meet virtually has impacted day-to-day operations, and has also impacted community engagement, making it possible for people to participate in engagement efforts without having to leave their homes. Staff have also enhanced the use of a recreation management system to better understand the needs of residents who use programs and to also communicate program modifications when required.

Enhancements were also made through continuous improvements that were developed and implemented during COVID-19. This has impacted processes at Dearness Home, Planning and Development, and Building. The Planning and Development area is undertaking a continuous improvement project centered around streamlining development approvals. This effort is 100% funded by the Province of Ontario and includes electronic record keeping and process enhancements. The project is ongoing and has included more than 20 detailed interviews with internal and industry stakeholders this summer to better understand the pain points they experience in the development approval process and as well as seek input in the identification of possible solutions. In partnership with stakeholders, the next steps will include the development of metrics and improvements to application review processes with a planned report to Committee in early 2023.

As staff work on the Master Accommodation Plan for Alternative Work Strategies and pilot programs, additional flexibility has been introduced for employees who are returning to City workspaces through the availability of temporary hybrid work arrangements that allow staff to work remotely for up to 50% of the time. This is in place where job functions and services are not impacted by hybrid work arrangements.

Early in the pandemic, London City Council established the London Community Recovery Network (LCRN) in partnership with leaders from London's public, private, non-profit, institutional sectors and those organizations representing communities that have experienced disproportionate impacts from COVID-19. The purpose of this network is to drive a strong and inclusive recovery for London. In the fall of 2021, the LCRN established a framework that identified a common vision, focus areas, and shared measures for community recovery and renewal in London. In 2020 and 2021, Council approved \$10 million in funding to support social and economic recovery measures. To date, close to \$7 million has been allocated, leaving almost \$3 million available for additional supports.

5.0 Managing Ongoing Impacts of COVID-19

As circumstances with COVID-19 continue to evolve, the City is well-prepared to manage ongoing impacts. From a community perspective, the Middlesex-London Health Unit continues to monitor the case counts and experience with COVID-19 and the Community Control Group remains at the ready in the event circumstances warrant additional community-wide management.

From an organizational perspective, City staff will continue to apply continuous improvement principles to identify effective and efficient ways to deliver services that have been affected by ongoing COVID-19 impacts.

Staffing shortages associated with COVID-19, in addition to an aging workforce, have prompted a more proactive outreach process for recruitment. Communicating the value of working at the City of London, beyond salary, is critical to attracting the best talent. The move to hybrid working arrangements, as well as added professional development opportunities are being used as tools in recruiting for positions that are hard to fill.

Where there are budget impacts as a result of ongoing impacts of COVID-19, including changes to service delivery or additional resources, these will be brought forward to Council through the 2023 Budget Update and through the 2024-2027 Multi-Year Budget Process.

Conclusion

It has been more than two years since COVID-19 first had an impact on City of London programs and services. Throughout this time, the City has provided vital services to the community, and the Civic Administration has responded quickly to changes to Provincial orders, restarting programs and services where it is safe and possible to do so, and modifying and restricting services when it was not.

While many of the immediate impacts of COVID-19 have subsided and programs and services have returned to pre-pandemic levels, there remain several ongoing, longer-term impacts that will continue to affect City operations. Staff are monitoring these closely and adjusting as required and when possible; however, a number of these impacts are not isolated to City services and are being experienced across the community, and in fact, across the country.

Looking ahead, there is also ongoing uncertainty about the potential impacts of a resurgence of COVID-19 on our workforce and on the community. These will also be monitored closely, with the ongoing commitment to align with any Provincial and local health guidance, and to be guided by the principles established at the onset of the

pandemic. Applying what has been learned over the past 2 years and working in collaboration with all community partners, the City is well-prepared to manage ongoing impacts of COVID-19, as well as to respond to any additional waves.

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CC: Senior Leadership Team