

THUNDER BAY – Politics - I have to ask why anyone would be opposed to a costing when that costing is at no expense to Thunder Bay taxpayers. All I'm saying is let's explore. We can't condemn rising emergency services and then not do anything to try and lower those costs.

Mayor Keith Hobbs – Lets Explore

Recently, there has been a lot of media coverage over my comments asking the Chief of Police for his opinion on an Ontario Provincial Police costing for police services for the City of Thunder Bay. A substantial amount of those comments have been taken out of context while others have been misinterpreted.

For the record, I have never called into question the ability of the Thunder Bay Police Service or its members to provide policing services to the city or its citizens. To say otherwise is malicious in nature and false. My comments have absolutely nothing to do with one organization being better than the other or, in other words, starting a turf war.

For the record, my comments have everything to do with my duties as mayor to ensure that our tax dollars are spent in the most efficient and effective way possible. During city council's budget deliberations, it was clear that emergency services (police, fire, ambulance) were once again driving increases to the overall tax base.

I have received many calls from concerned citizens over this increase and the fact that many people can't afford continuing tax increases which are mainly due to the increased budgets of emergency services.

StatsCan and other resources clearly indicate that we have a high ratio of officers-to-population as well as a high cost per-household for policing services. Many of my friends who are police officers wonder aloud if they are pricing themselves out of business.

On Jan. 16, at a conference on the Economics of Policing, Federal Minister of Public Safety Vic Toews stated, "Police services face two options — they can do nothing and eventually be forced to cut drastically, as we have seen in some countries; or they can be proactive, get ahead of the curve, and have greater flexibility in designing and implementing both incremental and meaningful structural reforms."

Further, Minister Toews added, “There is no question that policing is a difficult job for which officers should be fairly and competitively paid. That said, with salaries and benefits making up 80 to 90 per cent of costs, looking for efficiencies in the way police work is done, and by whom (emphasis added), will be important as we move forward.”

In my opinion, Minister Toews’ comments should resonate through all municipalities in this province.

My comments regarding an OPP costing are completely in line with the direction of federal leaders and would, if city council wished to pursue it, provide the city with an option on costs for police services. This issue is about options on how money and taxes should be spent and perhaps even further, on the areas it is being spent such as administrative versus front-line personnel and deployment models.

The option to get a costing is a zero-cost to the citizens of this city, however there is no sense discussing the pros and cons of the two police services when a costing isn’t even being considered by council.

A letter to the editor in the local paper dated Feb. 20, said “. . . the TBPS is a well-run, lean organization.”

I would agree that in some instances that may be true. However, it is a fact that the Thunder Bay Police Service has run significant negative variances over the last number of consecutive years while many, many other police services achieve surpluses or positive variances.

We tend to hear the same reasons for these negative variances such as unexpected crime projects but surely other police agencies have crime projects as well. Negative variances should be very worrisome to everybody as the only way to offset them is through reserve funds.

I am on the record for questioning the reasons for these negative variances as well as other internal policing issues relating to cost-effectiveness including the suspension and

charges against officers who were subsequently found not guilty or the charges completely withdrawn (after a change in police senior management). I am on the record for questioning why these officers were sitting at home collecting hundreds of thousands of dollars when they could have been performing real work. I am also on the record as questioning the hundreds of thousands of dollars spent on legal fees yet the Police Services Board has sat idly by allowing this to happen.

In the same letter, policing cost figures (savings) are quoted regarding the Municipality of Oliver Paipooonge switching from the Thunder Bay Police Service to the OPP. The fact of the matter is that their citizens explored an option and that option was significantly cheaper.

Having said that, the citizens of Pembroke and Perth just recently explored their options and the decision was made to abolish their respective municipal police services and go with the OPP. Suffice it to say that cost efficiencies were the deciding factor.

My argument is simple: if we are not willing to look at potential options and challenge the status quo at cutting costs when these options exist, then how can we possibly move forward as we continuously and quite vocally express our concerns over the increasing costs of emergency services?

At the end of the day, your city council must ensure your tax dollars get the best bang for your buck and this includes raising issues which are controversial to some.

For the record, I will continue to ask the questions which need to be asked and offer solutions despite others not wanting to let facts get in the way of a good story.

Mayor Keith Hobbs

City of Thunder Bay