

# “This is about squashing democracy in Stratford”: Residents challenge temporary city hall ban

CONNOR LUCZKA

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

Mike Sullivan put it plain and simple. His recent ban from City of Stratford property is undue.

“This is about squashing democracy in Stratford,” Sullivan said. “They do not want the public commenting on their activities – period – and so this is an easy way for them to do this with a completely unfettered, unchallengeable declaration that we violated some policy or another.”

On April 4, both Sullivan and Barb Shaughnessy received notices from the city’s solicitor, Paula Lombardi of Siskins Law Firm, informing them they have been suspended from all city property for three months. Any and all communication must be done through Lombardi’s office.

Both letters were largely the same and resulted from their deputations at the Feb. 26 city council meeting in which Sullivan and Shaughnessy spoke on a few items and the city claims they were in violation of the city’s respectful-workplace policy.

Shaughnessy spoke on a zone change application for 245 Downie St., better known as the Bradshaw Lofts, that would allow units to be licensed as short-term-rental accommodations.

Shaughnessy argued that the property should be focused on long-term housing, a priority in Stratford and the nation as a whole.

Sullivan spoke on that item, in agreement with Shaughnessy, though he also spoke on a closed-meeting investigation report completed by the city’s independent closed-meeting investigator. That report found council wrongly voted on over 100 items behind closed doors between 2018 and 2023.

“Old habits die hard,” Sullivan said at one point in his delegation. “There is no penalty in law for council’s misbehaviour ... but who was responsible for creating the mess in the first place? The clerk creates the agenda for each meeting, including determining which items should be in-camera. It is then up to council to decide whether to follow the clerk’s agenda or to move items off the in-camera agenda and discuss items in public.

“In the end, it is the chair of the meeting and council who are responsible for knowing the rules.”

Though critical of council and staff, Sullivan does not believe he was in vio-



## OLD HABITS DIE HARD

Mike Sullivan stands in front of Stratford City Hall, which he has been temporarily suspended from. Sullivan is one of a handful of Stratford residents seeking legal recourse for the city’s “heavy-handed” decision to ban them.

(CONNOR LUCZKA PHOTO)

lation of the city’s respectful-workplace policy.

The policy, found on the city’s website, prohibits any disrespectful or inappropriate behaviour on city property, giving the examples of harassment, rudeness, or causing distress to city employees, among other reasons.

Shaughnessy, too, does not believe she was in violation of the policy. Furthermore, she told the Stratford Times a number of the city’s assertions are flat out false.

For instance, Shaughnessy said the city has claimed she made comments to a member of the public that made them concerned about the safety and civility of public meetings, made aggressive and hostile comments to a member of senior administration in the kitchenette during break, and her actions were noticeably aggressive during said break.

Shaughnessy claims she was never near or in the kitchenette during the break in the Feb. 26 meeting and the other allegations are also false.

Sullivan, Shaughnessy, Jane Marie Mitchell and Sharon Collingwood, rep-

resented by David Donnelly of Donnelly Law, have challenged the city’s banning of Sullivan and Shaughnessy.

“In my opinion,” a letter from Donnelly to Lombardi reads, “the proposed ban is unconstitutional and illegal. It gives the appearance of being retaliation against the courageous citizens for blowing the whistle on past illegal council conduct.”

Mitchell was given a warning alongside Sullivan and Shaughnessy after delegating on the 2024 budget, which was also approved at that February meeting. Collingwood did not receive a warning nor a suspension but joined the group as a representative of Get Concerned Stratford.

Sullivan was an NDP MP for the Toronto riding of York South-Weston from 2011 to 2015. As a former politician, Sullivan said he is acutely aware of the kinds of criticism politicians and public employees can get.

“I was a politician for a while,” Sullivan said. “You don’t like somebody criticising you or your party’s policies, but it’s part of what you are, you know? You take that with the job.”

City CAO Joan Thomson said in an emailed statement that the investigative process for the temporary suspensions are set out in the city’s respectful-workplace policy.

Anyone can report acts of disrespectful and inappropriate behaviour they witness in the workplace, which city property is. Once an incident report is submitted, it goes to the appropriate manager. In consultation with the director of human resources and the CAO, an appropriate action is taken, in accordance with the respectful-workplace policy.

In this incident, staff also consulted a third-party law firm to conduct a review, Thomson said, though did not name the firm.

If a person wishes to appeal any action, Thomson said the party must address their concerns in writing with the CAO within 14 days of the decision. The appeal will be reviewed by a director and the CAO, and they may consult legal advice at any time in the investigation.

“The person making the appeal will receive a letter outlining the outcome of the decision,” Thomson said. “If the appellant is not satisfied, all further inquiries regarding the incident shall be referred to the Ontario Ombudsman.”

Thomson revealed that since the policy came into effect in 2023, less than five individuals have received temporary suspensions.

Individuals who have received temporary suspensions are still able to participate in city business, but communication must be directed toward the city’s solicitor first and then approved.

In regards to the legal action taken by Sullivan, Shaughnessy, Mitchell and Collingwood, Thomson gave the following statement:

“The city council chamber is a public space and also a workplace, and we are responsible for ensuring it’s a safe and respectful place for everyone. As a result of a few recent instances of disrespectful behaviour in the council chambers, the city has taken necessary action with a few individuals. We want people to feel welcome in our public spaces, but we also want them to feel safe and respected.”

In their letter, Sullivan and Shaughnessy’s lawyer said the city has until April 25 to rescind the suspensions. As of publication, no such action has been taken.

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# Where is the line between appropriate and inappropriate criticism? Mayor says its clearly defined in respectful workplace policy

CONNOR LUCZKA

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

News of the recent banning of Stratford residents from city property has quickly spread across the region, with many residents questioning what can and can't be said in the Festival City.

Stratford Mayor Martin Ritsma believes that the line between appropriate and inappropriate criticism is clearly defined in the respectful workplace policy – and that he full-heartedly believes that the action taken by the city is the right thing to do.

“They're really intellectual people that are not foreign to politics,” Ritsma said about the residents who were suspended when asked whether the line between what is appropriate and what is not is clearly defined. “I believe it's clear, and if it wasn't clear, then I believe as well that they had time since it's been implemented to now to say, ‘Hey, can you explain why that is like

that? And why is that?”

“You're entitled to your thoughts, but there's a fine line between, your rights to express your thoughts, but also the rights of those people that are receiving some of those thoughts.”

Ritsma made that statement following the city council meeting May 13 when Tim Forster, the husband of recently suspended resident Barb Shaughnessy, delegated at council.

Though Forster asked to speak to council on the respectful-workplace-policy training session that was held in-camera on May 6, the majority of his delegation had to do with the recent suspensions.

Ritsma cautioned Forster partway through his delegation, urging him to stick to the agenda item.

Forster claimed city CAO Joan Thomson did not follow the procedure in the policy since alleged threats of violence were made but the police were not called,

which is what is defined in the policy.

Forster went on to call the proceeding events a “kangaroo court” that is wasting time, taxpayer money and sowing division.

“You can stop this obscenity,” Forster said, asking for council to rescind the respectful-workplace policy and any banning currently in place. “Go back to the drawing board and get it right this time.”

Coun. Cody Sebben put forward two motions on the subject following the delegation, saying that he would have preferred a warning be issued rather than an outright suspension.

He put forward a motion for staff to investigate having these decisions come through council.

Thomson said the decision to suspend the affected parties is an operational one.

“So, I would ask for some clarification,” Thomson said. “Are you asking for all operational decisions made by staff to come

before council before they are implemented?”

“Of course not,” Sebben said, clarifying that certain operational decisions are brought to council's attention and when that happens, he would like council to review them.

That motion was defeated with only Sebben, Coun. Lesley Biehn and Coun. Geza Wordofa supporting it. A subsequent motion to have an alternate form of mediation be used instead of the current suspensions also died on the floor with only Sebben, Biehn and Wordofa supporting it.

After the meeting, Ritsma did not want “to get into that,” regarding the accusations which resulted in the ban, saying that it is not useful at this point.

“I think the useful piece is that we have a workplace policy,” Ritsma said. “(It) specifically states that ... creating a safe and respectful workplace and public space is a shared responsibility.”

# Police's new administrative building is up and running, but only a temporary fix to a much bigger problem

CONNOR LUCZKA

Times Correspondent

The Stratford Police Service (SPS) has long needed more space – and more appropriate space at that.

In fact, police chief Greg Skinner told the accessibility advisory committee at its May 7 meeting that it goes back longer than one might expect.

“I can go back and find minutes back as far as 1991,” Skinner said. “When they (the police services board) were talking about a new police station ... 17 George St. is not a building that was meant to be or was built to be barrier free – and to get there is going to be a challenge.”

Though progress has been slow going so far, in recent months much progress has been made.

Just this month, SPS revealed a new administrative hub located at 798 Erie St., just behind the Ford dealership.

The new location is primarily for back-office support and “alternate” reporting work. Front-line policing is still conducted out of 17 George St.

Freedom of Information requests, copies of reports, pardons, file destruction, taxi licences and record checks are being done at the new location, though record checks may also be done online as well.

The new location is also barrier-free, Skinner told the committee, and that was one of the reasons the site was identified and ultimately pursued by police.

The Erie Street location is not a permanent



(CONNOR LUCZKA PHOTO)

## ADMINISTRATIVE HUB

The new “administrative hub” for the Stratford Police Service at 798 Erie St. is where the public will go for anything related to Freedom of Information requests, copies of reports, pardons, file destruction, taxi licences and record checks.

solution, Skinner assured the committee. They have a five-year lease at the building and, in the future, the police services board still wants policing done at their downtown location at 17 George St., all under one roof.

In November, the board approved discussion on a new police station, be that a completely new facility or a renovation of the current location.

Since that decision, the board has honed in on adapting the current station for their purposes. An engineering report conducted but not yet released to the public has identi-

fied land on the station's property suitable for expansion.

A possible renovation is many years away, but under the deadlines of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA), public buildings in Ontario are expected to be accessible and barrier-free by 2025, a fast-approaching deadline.

To get the building compliant on time, Stratford city council approved a \$200,000 capital project in this year's budget to construct an accessibility ramp.

Originally, the design was intended to be

a permanent concrete structure, but with the future of the building in flux, council and staff thought it prudent to cut costs and construct a metal, temporary structure. The original cost was estimated to be \$275,000.

Tim Wolfe, director of community services, and Mark Hackett, manager of community facilities, presented to the committee on the temporary ramp to be installed at the George Street location, which would finally make the location barrier-free.

Wolfe also pointed out that, if renovations on the building go through and a permanent ramp is constructed or even the main entrance be moved to a more accessible location, then the ramp may be disassembled and constructed elsewhere in the city.

“Unfortunately, in Stratford that is not the only building that we need to address,” Wolfe said. “We're well aware of that.”

The project is in the design process, with a consultant retained by the City of Stratford making a final design. The consultant is aware of the requirements the city and the committee are requiring, Hackett said.

Hackett said a design will be finalized in the coming weeks and then a request for proposal can be issued.

Diane Sims, co-chair of the committee, has long been advocating for an accessible police station. She was thrilled with the news and that it is finally moving forward.

“Two years ago this month, I spoke to the police services board of my experience there,” Sims said. “I'm quite excited that this is happening, (to) get in there and get fingerprinted.”

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VOLUME 3 • ISSUE 19

MAY 31, 2024

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## Market Square Music returns with homegrown lineup

CONNOR LUCZKA

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

Stelle & Carter Trio kicked off this year's Market Square Music, but in case anyone missed it, there are plenty of nights to come down and enjoy.

The annual music series shines a spotlight on local artists who perform free concerts just behind city hall on Friday evenings this summer.

Stratford's own Dayna Manning, a Juno-nominated singer/songwriter, produces the show this year, taking on the project after organizing last year's Canada Day event.

Manning said this year she was attracted to it because of its grassroots style, calling it an elevated form of busking.

There is no stage for this concert series, meaning patrons will be on the same level as performers. There is a microphone system, but it's not a huge system, so crowds will have to gather around performers to really hear them.

"It's just meant to bring people together and highlight Stratford's musicians," Manning said. "Anything that unites the community through music is a priority for me as an artist."

Following Stelle & Carter Trio, Laura Neilson and Kaitlyn Famme will perform May 31, Cait and Pete from The Bookends will perform June 7, and Ethan Maac and Maggie Foster will close out the series on June 28.

Manning will also host a community singalong June 14 and Chippewan flautist and storyteller Christin Dennis will perform June 21 for National Indigenous Peoples Day.

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(CONNOR LUCZKA PHOTO)

### IT'S OFFICIAL!

The 72nd Stratford Festival season got started with a bang – and a pop of champagne – on May 27 with actors, patrons and creatives strutting the red carpet for the first show. See more photos on page 3.

## "Political spectacle" ensues as banned resident shows up for public meeting

CONNOR LUCZKA

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

At approximately 7:23 p.m. May 28, nearly half an hour after the scheduled regular Stratford council meeting was supposed to start, the packed gallery roared at Stratford city hall.

Mayor Martin Ritsma and CAO Joan Thomson arrived in council chambers with Ritsma announcing he will not call the meeting to order.

"We are going to postpone the meeting until further notice," he said as boos from those gathered for the meeting erupted from the gallery.

"Cowards!" One angry resident exclaimed as he left.

The May 28 council meeting's agenda was packed with a public meeting and a number of items of note, from special-occasion permit requests to tender awards for a street reconstruction.

That was evidently derailed by the arrival of Mike Sullivan, a Stratford resident who was recently suspended from City of Stratford property.

Sullivan arrived with a baseball cap and a small package of papers, telling the Stratford Times he intended to speak at the public meeting scheduled to discuss a proposed development at 93 Trinity St. and 266 King St.

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# “Political spectacle” ensues as banned resident shows up for public meeting

CONTINUED FROM FRONT

As the gallery filled with more residents, council was delayed as the mayor, CAO and clerk Tatiana Dafoe were absent. At around the 15-minute mark, some residents began to audibly heckle, with one resident asking, “Do you get paid if you don’t show up on time?”

Ritsma entered the gallery at one point to speak with Sullivan before the meeting was supposed to start. Sullivan later shared that Ritsma had asked him to leave and that he had declined because it was his democratic right to speak.

Two Stratford Police Service officers were in attendance, just outside of council chambers, and Sullivan said that is what he expected.

“I expected the boys in blue to call me out,” Sullivan said. “But they got a letter from our lawyer today saying, ‘If you do, there will be penalties for you.’”

Ultimately, Sullivan was not escorted out and the meeting was postponed.

On April 4, Sullivan and Barb Shaughnessy were among the residents who received notices from the city’s solicitor, Paula Lombardi of Siskins Law Firm, informing them they have been suspended from all city property for three months, stemming from actions

that occurred at the city council meeting on Feb. 26 that violated the city’s respectful workplace policy.

Both Sullivan and Shaughnessy have joined with Get Concerned Stratford and David Donnelly of Donnelly Law to challenge that suspension.

Tim Forster, husband of Shaughnessy, was in attendance at the May 28 meeting and said he was shocked the mayor would “unilaterally” cancel the meeting.

“That, to me, makes no sense – but that’s where we are in Stratford,” he said.

Thomson declined to comment, however Ritsma did share one brief statement, saying there is a process in place and that process must be allowed to move forward, declining to go further into detail on what that process is.

Coun. Cody Sebben, who attempted to pass a motion to rescind the suspensions at the last council meeting on May 13, said he was very disappointed with what occurred, thinking mainly of the items on the agenda that may be time sensitive.

“I think there’s going to need to be a review of our procedural by-law,” Sebben said, “and whether that was followed.”

Sebben went on to say that as some of the gallery members voiced their frustration, he knew where they were coming from, while also stressing that in no way is he attempting to disparage staff or the work that they do.

“I feel their frustration and in some ways I’m as frustrated as they are,” Sebben said. “But I’m also trying to, you know ... I want to follow the procedural bylaw.”

“Quite frankly, I was surprised to see Mr. Sullivan here,” Coun. Mark Hunter said after council chambers had emptied. “And I was surprised – a little surprised – by the response ... Whether he agrees with that process or not, we did determine that he should be staying away from city property and he chose not to accept that and to make a political spectacle by showing up here.”

Hunter said the tenor of the dialogue in the city, coming from a small group of people, is hostile.

“I believe everybody on council was very open to listening to the community. We want to know what the community wants, and anything that gets in the way of that messaging, I think, is problematic.”

He also added that, without “calling anyone out,” the city like-



## BANNED RESIDENT

**Mike Sullivan sits in the gallery of Stratford city hall council chambers on May 28. Sullivan, who was recently suspended from all city property, came for the scheduled public meeting – before it was postponed half an hour after it was scheduled to start.**

(CONNOR LUCZKA PHOTO)

ly has not done a good job at communicating with the whole community and that is something that can be improved. How exactly it can be, he does not know.

Coun. Larry McCabe added he recently attended the Ontario Small Urban Municipalities conference and that “volatile” interactions between the public and council and staff are top of mind throughout the province.

“It is very concerning that we can’t come together and at least have conversations in which peo-

ple are civil to each other,” he said.

Joan Bidell, a resident in attendance for the public meeting, said she knew many residents that came out to speak at the meeting, some with mobility issues, made a concerted effort to come and hear about the development.

She did not think the postponement of the meeting was an appropriate response.

“I just think it’s disrespectful,” Bidell said. “It’s very disrespectful.”

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VOLUME 3 • ISSUE 21

JUNE 28, 2024

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## Taxi fares set to rise in September

CONNOR LUCZKA

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

Inflation and rising costs are to blame for the most recent request to raise the taxi fare in Stratford, a request that was approved at the Stratford police services board meeting June 19.

As Gail Cossey of Aunt Gail's Taxi pointed out, it's not just the startling rise of the price of gas in the country.

"Insurance, repairs, oil, tires, licensing, cleaning supplies, washing, vacuuming, all of these items have increased in price due to inflation," Cossey told the board. "And especially the costs of repairs are through the roof. ... We really need a taxi-fare increase immediately."

Cossey petitioned the board with Brad Rickert of Radio Cab, both requesting that the flat fee all Stratford taxis charge increase from \$14 to \$16 with the senior rate increasing from \$13 to \$15.

The taxi fares previously increased in 2023, going from \$13 to \$14 and the senior fare rising from \$12 to \$13.

Though they were a united front in their request, Rickert also took the time to say he does not agree with the system as a whole, saying the board shouldn't be allowed to inhibit free enterprise.

"Johnny wants to sell pizzas in Stratford," Rickert said. "Johnny comes to town. The city tells him where he can set up shop, how big his washrooms need to be, how many handicap spots are out the front – everything. Except the city does not tell Johnny how much to charge for a slice of pizza. No other business is regulated within the city as to how it operates from the business aspect."

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### BEST OF SHOW

The 2024 Dog Days of Summer dog show winners. See the story on page 5.

(SARA BRADFORD PHOTO)

## City ban fiasco continues; two more meetings cancelled moments after starting

CONNOR LUCZKA

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

The three Stratford citizens suspended from city property will soon be allowed back in council chambers as the suspensions lift on July 2, but that hasn't stopped a few of them from protesting the suspensions and showing up to meetings regardless.

Just recently, their arrivals in council chambers have upturned two public meetings on top of the council meeting that was cancelled May 28.

At the June 24 council meeting, Barb Shaughnessy came to the meeting late with husband Tim Forster as a motion to

approve a sewer tender hit the floor.

Shaughnessy and company were noticed by Mayor Martin Ritsma as they entered, who looked frustrated, but did not immediately end the meeting.

After the motion to approve the recommended tender passed, Ritsma acknowledged Shaughnessy's coming and asked her to leave.

Shaughnessy started to speak before Ritsma spoke over her, saying he won't entertain a conversation and then asked council to take a recess. The room promptly emptied other than Coun. Cody Sebben, who stayed in chambers throughout the recess.

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# City ban fiasco continues; two more meetings cancelled moments after starting

CONTINUED FROM FRONT

After some councillors and staff came back in, Coun. Bonnie Henderson angrily said to Shaughnessy, "Come on Barb, show some respect for staff. Disgraceful."

"You're being very disrespectful to the whole city," Henderson said a few moments later. "I'm sorry, I can't hold my tongue but I can't believe it. I had a lot of respect for you before. You're showing exactly how you feel about our city. Disgraceful."

After asking Shaughnessy again to leave, Ritsma entertained a motion to adjourn, which a number of councillors raised their hands to move.

Sebben objected to the adjournment, asking for a recorded vote, and Henderson again expressed her displeasure with Shaughnessy's arrival.

Coun. Geza Wordofa and Sebben opposed adjournment in a recorded vote, but the motion passed 9-2.

Just a week earlier, Robert Roth, a retired journalist and former editor of the now-defunct Stratford Gazette, was scheduled to speak at the June 18 finance and labour relations subcommittee meeting about the suspensions, or more specifically the respectful workplace policy which has been the

tool the city has used to enact the suspensions.

After getting through just his introduction, chair Mark Hunter stopped Roth's presentation after spotting Mike Sullivan, another suspended citizen, entering the gallery with a baseball hat on.

After asking Sullivan to leave, Hunter adjourned the meeting saying they are unable to continue a meeting with staff present since that would open the city up to liability.

Roth subsequently wrote an open letter to city council, strongly objecting to the course of action the city has taken.

"It is profoundly disingenuous, undemocratic and dangerous to a free society to shield city hall decisions from public scrutiny and accountability simply by slapping the label of 'administrative matter' on profound actions such as banning people from the council chambers.

"Pulling an 'administrative' rabbit out of the political hat does not make the hat disappear. These decisions are political," Roth wrote.

Roth also asserted the notion that the suspended individuals are unsafe, Sullivan in particular, does not make sense.

"So, on July 2, he is still 'un-

safe,' but on July 3 he suddenly becomes 'safe' and can attend council meetings again," Roth wrote.

Ritsma told the Stratford Times after the June 24 meeting ended that once the term of suspension has come to completion, the term will have completed, when asked whether or not there will be further action taken after the suspensions lift on July 2.

Ritsma further said not one person on the streets of Stratford has stopped him or told him what the city is doing is wrong.

Sebben expressed frustration with the whole debacle.

"I'm hearing from lots of people; they share the same concerns I do and they think things have gotten out of hand," Sebben said.

Henderson, meanwhile, also expressed frustration from the other side, saying in the meeting she has also heard from a lot of people, all thanking the city for addressing the bullying that has been occurring.

Shaughnessy, in the statement she tried to read during the council meeting, wrote that the suspension has had an impact on her health. She is asking for footage from the Feb. 26 council meeting be released to their lawyer, David Donnelly of Donnelly Law, as the



(CONNOR LUCZKA PHOTO)

## CANCELLED MEETING

Barb Shaughnessy at the June 24 Stratford city council meeting, arriving before the meeting was cancelled shortly thereafter.

footage would exonerate her.

The suspensions occurred after the February council meeting in which Shaughnessy, Sullivan and Ken Wood were suspended for their actions which the city claims contradicted the respectful workplace policy.

The policy prohibits any disrespectful or inappropriate behaviour on city property, giving the examples of harassment, rudeness, or causing distress to city employees, among other reasons.

Sullivan and Shaughnessy delegated on a few agenda items,

notably a closed-meeting-investigation report and a zoning change for the Bradshaw Lofts, and do not believe their delegations nor their actions in city hall constituted a suspension being necessary.

Sullivan and Shaughnessy, through Get Concerned Stratford, a citizens' group, retained Donnelly Law to push back against their suspensions.

Wood, although also suspended, did not join with Sullivan and Shaughnessy's legal action citing financial reasons, though did previously express support towards them in their endeavour.

## Taxi fares set to rise in September

CONTINUED FROM FRONT

"I think the purpose of this board is to ensure that the cars are looked after, the drivers are all vetted," Rickert continued. "Those aspects are what you're here (for), to protect the public. As to the business side of things ... you can't change our expenses, you can't change our profit. We have to deal with what we deal with."

Rickert also said, according to the by-

law, the board is to approve the fare, but he argued it does not say the board is to set the fare.

Tim Doherty, chair of the board, argued against that, saying this is how the process has been done in the last few years. He also said a number of years ago they considered reviewing the bylaw but didn't get support from the taxi companies at the time, asking Rickert if he felt the bylaw is no longer serving

him or the other companies in Stratford well.

"From this aspect, no," Rickert answered.

Cossey's proposal was approved, though there will be a period of time before the changes are formally approved, likely to happen at the September meeting when the board meets next.

The board also agreed to discuss the bylaw as well, which Rickert expressed

appreciation for.

Doherty said they will work with the city's clerk office to look at the bylaw and open up a conversation about it, perhaps revisiting the bylaw at the September meeting as well, though Mayor Martin Ritsma noted the clerk's office has been busy as of late.

Other fees that taxi services charge, such as a waiting-time charge, will stay the same.

# Happy Canada Day!



**MATTHEW RAE**  
MPP – Perth-Wellington

519-272-0660 | 1-800-461-9701  
matthew.rae@pc.ola.org | matthewrae.ca