

Councillor's Report for June 11st 2018

Beverley Tripp

Culminating on Friday, May 11, 2018, exactly one month from the date of this report's publication, the City of Grand Forks and surrounding RDKB area experienced the worst flooding in known history. On that day, the Kettle and Granby rivers inundated floodplain properties, spilling over dikes and berms that could not contain the waters which had risen around two feet higher than the last recorded highwater mark. The resulting devastation was utterly astounding, requiring rapid emergency evacuations of most downtown businesses and several neighborhoods, while people looked helplessly on, powerless to do anything against the raging rivers that had now created lakes and channels where heretofore there had been none. Due to the rapid rise of the river, many people and pets were still stranded in homes, and several emergency rescues took place to bring them to safety. Compliments must go to the fast-thinking, hard-working responders in the Emergency Response Center, (EOC) who put into action a boundary-wide emergency plan that undoubtedly alleviated much additional suffering and loss in those first harrowing days.

During the next few days, people anxiously waited for yet another forecasted crest in the rivers, which thankfully, never came. But the damage that was already done by the water was nothing short of catastrophic. As evacuation orders were rescinded, people slowly began returning to businesses and neighborhoods to assess the carnage. What they encountered was really quite unbelievable. Hundreds of homes and dozens of businesses were totally awash with several feet high frigid, filthy water, floating garbage and debris that once were prized possessions. Many also began receiving the devastating news that their insurance was inadequate to cover them from the overland water damage. While the community rallied to help, and outside agencies such as the Red Cross, Salvation Army and Samaritans Purse rolled into town, the seemingly insurmountable task of clean-up began. With that came concerns and deliberations about who would deal with and pay for debris removal. Thankfully, the RDKB worked out a deal with the Province for garbage removal.

On Sunday, May 27th, I made it a priority to be back in Grand Forks to return from Terrace a day early in order to attend an impromptu public meeting preceding a scheduled In Camera meeting. I wanted to be present to make sure that I heard the concerns of residents impacted by the flood, and further understand the questions they had. I have since compiled a list of questions that I submit here:

- Whose responsibility are the dikes (we know some of the pieces here, but certainly no everything).
- Will the dikes be built to standards that will protect against another catastrophic flood?
- Will (some) people's properties need to be expropriated in order to do this work?
- What about properties that are not re-buildable? What will happen to the buildings on them, especially if they have now become an environmental hazard to clean up, (which I have been told is already the case for some properties)?
- Will the City buy the land? Can the City still require that the taxes be paid on those properties?
- What about people that have no insurance and can't afford to rebuild?

- What about people who were renting out homes and don't qualify for DFA or Samaritans Purse assistance because they're considered a business?
- **Is it even safe for people to be in some areas, or are there health risks that we need to know about** (I was told yesterday that anyone opening a fridge or freezer after this long is at risk of dying due to the toxicity of the contents)?
- How much money can we expect to receive from the Province for disaster relief?
- How much money can we expect from the Feds for disaster relief **(Neil, were you able to speak with anyone at the FCM about our situation)?**
- Will there be requirements for allocating the money? Can we choose the projects or does it have to be designated in advance?
- What's the condition of our downtown core buildings (I heard that there is now a creek flowing under the downtown core that has washed away some of the buildings' foundations)?
- What about businesses that seemingly have "walked away?" How does the City connect with them to find out what their plans are?
- What about residents who seemingly have walked away? Same question as above...
- What's the condition of our city's infrastructure (damage to roads, sewers, electricity)?
- When will we get answers to the toxicity of the soil and air in the Ruckle area?
- What is the City doing with regards to housing (we learned some of this in-camera but it should be discussed publicly, I believe)?

As we, as a City, move along in this situation, even greater issues and concerns have now begun to emerge: things like who is responsible for maintaining the dikes, structural damage to buildings, ground and slope instability, ground and air contamination, and on like that. With the Emergency Center now being turned into a Resiliency Center, and a Recovery Coordinator having been hired, these issues need to be given our immediate attention. There are many questions like these that need to be answered so that people can make informed plans for longer-term arrangements, and find solutions to housing repair, and reclamation of damaged properties.

For Councillors, the process of getting and staying informed has been, unfortunately, quite a challenge. We do not have a direct role at the EOC, and the information we have been relying on is the same as is generated for the public, i.e. press releases and bulletins. In this event, my personal role has been one of helping wherever and whenever I could. I see little value in listing those activities, and like so many others who have worked tirelessly and have given so much toward flood relief efforts, I think we all feel we could/should have done more, the needs we have seen around us have been so phenomenal. I have been down in the Johnstons Flats and North and South Ruckles areas many times to get first-hand knowledge of the situation. Also, in meetings with the EOC staff, and visits to the Emergency/ Resiliency Center and of course, communications with our City staff, we have been getting information that helps us understand the gravity of the situation, but further clarification is needed at many levels. Speaking with the people who live in the affected areas has provided a good overview of the general needs of those neighborhoods, and the more unique needs of individual residents. I have been relaying that

information back to the city whenever I could, and by setting up a makeshift community bulletin board on 2nd Avenue, I have been trying to communicate vital information back to the folks in the Ruckles neighborhoods who have requested it.

But better educating oneself to be able to make the hard and necessary decisions at the council table is crucial as we move forward. We do not have an easy task ahead. We need creative and visionary thinkers; we need to clearly hear what the needs of the community are and take steps to get those needs met; we need better communication between staff, agencies and government, and we need quicker response times. Now that emergency orders have been lifted, there are other “emergencies” to contend with. In the recovery phase, we need to find quick solutions to issues such as the immediate housing crisis, the financial crisis of uninsured residents, the diking situation, air and ground contamination, rebuilding of homes in a safe manner, businesses needing to get back on their feet, and much more. We need to get financial help from both the Province and the feds to rebuild. We need an inventory of every affected property and its occupants, being able to keep track of the progress made, like which permits have been obtained and what is left to complete before people can return to their homes and businesses. We need to find and/or facilitate alternative accommodation for displaced families. And we need to take a long, hard look at our finances, and not be reluctant to reallocate resources as required to help those affected by the flood.

This situation is far from over, and it isn't going away any time soon. It's going to take a while for us to really understand the magnitude of the devastation, and we need patience and grace with one another as we work toward a new reality for this community. But I believe it can be done, and I will remain committed to working to make the city of Grand Forks and our surrounding area an even better place to live than it was before.

Respectfully submitted,

Beverley Tripp