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Town councillors look back and look ahead

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Oliver Town council had a challenging year in 2015, but it anticipates being just as busy in the new year. From left are Andre Miller, Larry Schwartzenberger, Rick Machial, Maureen Doerr, Petra Veintimilla, Mayor Ron Hovanes and Jack Bennest.

Photo by Lyonel Doherty

As 2015 came and went, the *Chronicle* was curious to get some perspective on the year from our local elected officials. We asked each of our councillors, as well as the mayor, to reflect on their year in office, and set the political stage for 2016.

Below are the four questions we posed, and each member of council's responses, in the order they were received.

1.) What is the single most important issue facing council, and the town in 2016?

2.) What will your goals as a councillor be in 2016? How do you plan to accomplish those goals?

3.) What was the most difficult issue council faced in 2015? How do you think council handled it?

4.) What surprised you the most, from a council perspective, in 2015?

Andre Miller

1.) As a water councillor I have a different agenda than a regular councillor. Trying to attract companies that will employ people is my number one thing. But I absolutely don't know what we can do [to make that happen].

2.) My goal is to keep renovating our irrigation system and upgrading it. That is an ongoing process, so I don't think there's anything to accomplish there aside from passing the budget, which we've already done. To keep on upgrading our water system remains the main thing for me.

3.) Dismissing our CAO was a big thing. Coming to the decision that we were going to do it was [particularly] difficult. I can't get into many specifics, but I think the council and the mayor handled it very well.

Council was pressured by the Okanagan Basin Water Board and other municipalities asking us why we didn't put on water restrictions. Council as a whole said "no, we aren't going to do it," and as it turns out council was correct; we were not in a water deficit.

I think we stood our ground over other communities giving us pressure. As you can see we're not in a drought, we may have the odd fluctuation in rainfall, but in Oliver our water table is fine. We may formulate a plan for water conservation in the time of a drought, but one season does not make a drought.

4.) Not much from a council perspective, but from a water standpoint was the amount of our increase in usage: it went up substantially. It was all weather and environmental related, and I don't think we really have a problem with our usage increasing. It may mean something in the future if we're to set goals for water conservation. On the other hand it doesn't mean anything because we're in the agriculture business, and what we farm needs to be watered.

Larry Schwartzenberger

1.) Probably crime prevention. Unfortunately, we have had a rash of criminal activity over the last year. While we are in close contact with our local RCMP detachment, there is only so much they can do with the resources they have. The Oliver detachment has put forward a business case for two additional officers and the Town is allocating funds for extra security patrols by a private contractor at night. As we continue budget deliberations in the new year, crime prevention and public engagement on this issue will have a high priority.

2.) The promotion of economic development within the Town is the number one goal of council's strategic plan for the next three years. Downtown revitalization, land development opportunities and marketing strategies are some of the key components in the promotion of economic development that I will be working on. Getting the youth of Oliver more involved in municipal affairs remains one of my goals. I will be working with the Oliver library in the new

year on a workshop designed to encourage youth to get more involved in their community. Council will also review the Official Community Plan in 2016 and will engage the public in this review.

3.) The Wilson Mountain fire was a huge event that could have had disastrous results. People within town were evacuated (including Claire and me), emergency services sprang into action to coordinate relief and the Oliver Fire Department did an absolutely outstanding job at protecting the town from harm. Going forward, council is applying for grant money to acquire strategies for preventing interface fires in the future.

4.) I wasn't surprised, but it was reaffirmed to me what a caring and thoughtful community Oliver really is. From the heroes welcome given to our firefighters and first responders at the appreciation barbecue after the Wilson Mountain fire, to the support given to our food bank, the Knights of Columbus Christmas food hampers and our new refugee family from Syria; Oliver can always be counted on to lend a hand whenever and wherever it is needed.

Rick Machial

1.) There's not one issue, there's a bunch of them that are all fairly important. I think a transition to a new CAO is important; making sure that whoever comes on board gets going and gets things done, because last year was almost a waste.

From a water perspective we're looking at maybe making a decision on getting somebody to do an intensive review of the canal. We've been spending quite a bit of money over the years repaving bottoms and pouring new concrete and it's long overdue that we do an extensive review of the entire canal.

2.) My goals are to make sure that the water keeps flowing. That's always my biggest goal, to make sure that our system keeps working properly and efficiently, and starting to look at the canal is a big part of making that happen.

Council hasn't decided yet [whether] we'll go out to a consultant. Last time the canal had an extensive look was back in the 90s, when the entire rehab was done, so it's been a long time.

3.) Dealing with the problems around the CAO were difficult issues for council, and I think we handled it properly. That was a difficult time and the way it all happened was difficult, even though I can't really elaborate on it.

4.) How the fire got so out of hand really surprised me. How the community had to deal with all those forest fire was the biggest issue of the year. I was surprised how they let it get so out of hand. There's always praise heaped on everybody, but I personally wasn't happy with all that came down.

I think a quicker reaction by [the Ministry of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations] was needed. I know people who called the fire in when it was just a puff of smoke. We're always

quick to heap accolades on people, and we're very grateful for what they do to go and fight that forest fire, but if they were a little quicker on the ball we wouldn't have had a forest fire like that.

Mayor Ron Hovanes

- 1.) I believe the most important issue in 2016 will be our Official Community Plan review. It is long overdue and we have had a number of recent planning issues. The review will allow for significant community involvement and it will guide Oliver for years to come.
- 2.) As a council we will also refocus on our strategic plan. Next year will also benefit from the full economic impact of 240 full-time jobs coming to the South Okanagan.
- 4.) The biggest surprise for me in 2015 was being faced with how at risk we are to an interface wildfire. Being surrounded by farms, and desert it came as a real awakening how we all escaped what could have been a true disaster. Along with the rest of our community I am still very proud and thankful for all of the individuals who got us through that intense period.

Jack Bennest

- 1.) The review of the strategic plan with a newly hired administrator and the Okanagan Correctional Centre going operational.
- 2.) One part of our strategic plan is further planning work on the creation of a separate people's park near the Fairview Road bridge. I will lead that push with budget money set aside. Public safety and security of property is important to me and I will urge council to fund private security, if and when it is necessary, so that criminals operating in our area see the "not welcome" signs with boots on the ground.
- 3.) The loss of senior staff and finding replacements. That has now been completed.
- 4.) The size and scope of the summer forest fire, the effects it had on people and the great work of fire, forest and emergency officials.

(Councillors Petra Veintimilla and Maureen Doerr did not take part in the article by press time.)

By Trevor Nichols