Wellington implements county-wide Community Improvement Plan

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WELLINGTON COUNTY

Societal norms constantly reiterate "don't judge a book by its cover," but every time a new person visits a downtown, that's exactly what they're doing - judging a town by its appearance.

To help towns and villages make this first impression more appealing, Wellington County has implemented a county-wide Community Improvement Plan (CIP).

"(A CIP) essentially is just a planning tool ... for any kind of physical property improvements," said Jana Burns, director of economic development for Wellington County.

"We want to create a easier, quicker way to bring value to under-utilized properties and to generate economic activity in Wellington County."

In Ontario, counties are not permitted to provide funding directly to a business owner, Burns explained.

"So [if municipalities] do not have a CIP in place, the Planning Act restricts them from being able to provide money to business because then ... it's bonusing," she said.

To take advantage of the county plan, each member municipality must have its own CIP.

Guelph-Eramosa is the only lower-tier Wellington municipality that has not yet



OLD POST CENTRE FOR BUSINESS AND CREATIVITY

implemented a CIP, but it is currently going through the development process.

In doing this, each municipality is able to set its own priorities and give out incentives and grants that are applicable to specific areas.

Centre Wellington has created a CIP that aims to encourage the revitalization and re-development of its urban areas.

The goal of Erin's CIP is to stimulate economic development and show that the municipality is business friendly.

Mapleton's CIP strives to stimulate physical improvements in the defined project area.

The CIP in Minto is a framework to stimulate private sector investment in Harriston, Palmerston and Clifford.

In Puslinch the CIP is in place to assist with downtown/main street revitalization and beautification efforts, support renewal within urban areas and the industrial corridor, support new and existing business opportunities, and promote economic development advantages of Puslinch.

The Wellington North CIP encourages rehabilitation of commercial, industrial and institutional buildings and their façades, improvement of commercial signage and redevelopment of vacant and underutilized properties and buildings.

Wellington County also identified its own priorities.

In talking to business leaders and municipalities, Burns said the county priorities include, but are not limited to:

- affordable rental housing;
- green infrastructure buildings; and
- construction value threshold assistance.

"Most [municipalities are] focused on their downtowns and they want to see physical beautification of their downtowns and bringing dignity back into the buildings that are commercial and residential spaces," Burns said.

"We're just taking that up another level and providing another level of funding if you meet certain criteria that meet the priorities across the county."

Businesses will need to make an application only with their local lower-tier municipality to be eligible for both levels of CIP funding.

However, Burns stressed that if a municipality's CIP coverage area does not include an area that's included in Wellington County's CIP, businesses that may have benefited from county funding will not be eligible.

For example, if a municipality's CIP includes downtown businesses but not agricultural businesses, downtown business owners are eligible for the Wellington CIP but agricultural business owners are not.

Because of that, some municipalities are opening up their CIPs to more accurately align with the Wellington County plan, providing businesses with a chance for all possible funding options.

One example of a successful CIP-funded project is the restoration of the Old Post Centre for Business and Creativity in Harriston.

"That was a phenomenal transformation and it was a nice demonstration of how the town participated basically in a critical infrastructure piece in their downtown," Burns said. "It's such a beautiful building.

"It warranted that kind of investment."



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JANA BURNS, DIRECTOR OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, WELLINGTON COUNTY

The Wellington County plan is split into two sections: Invest Well and Invest Ready.

The Invest Ready grant is for a property that is not currently being used and has specific development constraints like soil and habitat surveys that can be quite expensive. The program would provide up to an additional $20,000, on top the township grant, which the owner is not required to match.

"That would help you to cover any due diligence or planning or technical or design studies," Burns said.

The Wellington CIP also provides an incremental equivalency tax grant. Burns said once the business is done construction, the value of the property will increase. The incremental equivalency tax grant will provide funding to help ease the business into its new property tax value over a five-year period. By the end of the five years, the business will be paying its full taxes.

"Then we have an Invest More grant which is where we're supporting a broad range of improvements to existing buildings and properties and working with the member municipalities to contribute funding to beautification and revitalization of built-up areas," Burns said.

The Invest Well program is like a top-up program, she added. It's an additional $10,000 into renovations.

"So if you wanted to put in a window, too, then that would help with that," Burns said.

The county has also negotiated with Community Futures organizations that work within its boundaries to provide low-interest grants.

Burns said business owners indicated they would like to update their buildings but often don't have the cash flow because each lower tier grant requires the business to match funding. By receiving a loan from Community Futures, business owners have access to the capital needed to apply for a CIP grant and get the projects off the ground.

Because the Wellington County CIP was approved in June, there was no funding available for 2018, and Burns said the hope is to start accepting applications in the spring of 2019, as long as all lower-tier municipalities have completed their CIPs.

The required funding for the program will be included in the 2019 budget.

"When businesses invest in our downtowns and create jobs and improve their buildings and the value of those buildings, they are presumably paying more property taxes and the goal of this is to create stronger, more beautiful communities that have economic opportunities," Burns said.

"I would argue that the small piece that we're giving to a slew of investors that are making significant property improvements is worth it.

"I mean it's an investment in our downtowns and I think it's an absolutely viable one and a critical one as well. We want to remain competitive and we want

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to facilitate change and this is a great deal to do so."

The Wellington County CIP will be reviewed each year to ensure its priorities are correct.

"A big part of this is we're collecting metrics and we've incorporated those into this program as well," Burns said.

"So we'll be looking at how we spent the money, what kind of return on investment we've had, where has it been going, are the priorities the right priorities, has the economy changed such that we need to revise the criteria?"

For more information about the Wellington County CIP, as well as each the CIPs of the lower-tier municipalities, visit www.wellington.ca. BL

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BEFORE



BRODERICK'S OF FERGUS RECEIVED A CIP GRANT FROM CENTRE WELLINGTON TOWNSHIP FOR OUTDOOR FACADE IMPROVEMENTS.

AFTER

