

## Wellness Centre - Coboconk

### Background

The community of Coboconk is working to enhance medical and wellness services for the residents and visitors of the northern areas of the City of Kawartha Lakes. Structural issues with the existing Coboconk Medical Centre building has required the re-location of the Medical Centre into a portable building temporarily. The Coboconk, Norland & Area Chamber of Commerce is spearheading an initiative to create an opportunity for a new Wellness Centre to serve our communities. This report provides background on the challenges faced, and provides justification and support of the opportunities envisioned.

### History and Use of the Coboconk Medical Centre

The building housing the Coboconk Medical Centre was first built by the Township of Bexley, now a part of the City of Kawartha Lakes, in 1974. The facility is approximately 4,400 square feet in size and is located at 21 Grandy Road in the centre of Coboconk. This building was specifically built for the purpose of housing a medical centre, and has continued to operate as a medical centre since it was built over 40 years ago.

The facility is owned by the City of Kawartha Lakes. Operation and maintenance of the building is performed by the City's Building and Property Division within Community Services. Lease agreements were established for two doctors to operate out of the facility. Since 1992, Dr. Warsi has provided general and family medical care to patients out of the Coboconk Medical Centre. From 2003 – 2016 Dr. Chung also provided dental care for 500 patients. Currently, the Coboconk Medical Centre continues to have one doctor, leaving many families and senior citizens without access to a local doctor.

### Challenges

In September of 2016, during a routine inspection of the property by the City of Kawartha Lakes, initial problems with the Coboconk Medical Centre building were identified. Brick was seen to be coming away from the wall, suggesting a structural issue. To further investigate and examine the property, the City retained AMR Engineering Limited. AMR confirmed that structural issues with the building were forcing the walls of the building out of alignment, causing movement of the wall, breakage of metal ties, and cracking of mortar joints and masonry units. Ultimately, AMR determined that these issues were affecting the integrity of the building and advised that the "building be vacated immediately and remain vacated until remedial works have been completed." This statement was echoed by the City's insurer, Frank Cowan Company, who recommended that an "alternative location for the medical centre be pursued immediately."

Recognizing the need to maintain the services of the Coboconk Medical Centre in the community, an alternative operating arrangement was implemented while more permanent options for the medical centre were evaluated. In 2017, the City installed a temporary facility (portable modular building) in the parking lot adjacent to the building. The temporary facility is 2,100 square feet. Dr. Warsi continues to offer medical services, operating out of the temporary

facility. There is no available space in these temporary accommodations for an additional doctor or registered practical nurse or other complementary health services.

At the February 13, 2018 City of Kawartha Lakes Council Meeting, a decision was made to demolish the old Coboconk Medical Centre. Staff members were also directed to investigate the cost of erecting a permanent medical centre facility in Coboconk, as well as the possibility of developing a grant program to support medical service provision in the City. The costs of erecting a permanent medical centre in Coboconk were presented to Council in April of 2018. The costs were \$1,277,710 for a 3,500 square foot facility (an ideal facility) or \$912,130 for a 2,600 square foot (reduced) facility.

The City and community is currently challenged to deliver an appropriate solution to provide permanent medical services in Coboconk for the area.

### **Need for Continued Operation**

The Ontario Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care (MOHLTC) defines rural communities as “those with a population of less than 30,000 that are greater than 30 minutes away from a community with a population of more than 30,000,” (MOHLTC, 2011). Coboconk is captured in this definition and many of the residents of the area need to travel between 30 to 90 minutes for a family doctor. MOHLTC (2011) recognizes that in Ontario, rural residents tend to have lower health status than their urban counterparts, which can be expected to also be the case in Coboconk as a highly rural community. Specifically, rural areas tend to have lower life expectancy at birth, greater all-cause mortality rates, higher proportions of residents with fair/poor health status and greater proportions of residents reporting being overweight (MOHLTC, 2011). The lack of rural medical services also leads to higher hospitalization rates in rural areas (MOHLTC, 2011), which can cause higher wait times and limited resources (i.e. staff time) for service provision. Permanent health services in Coboconk are needed to address the rural health concerns of the area.

In addition to being highly rural, Coboconk and its surrounding areas, in line with the City of Kawartha Lakes, has a large senior population. In 2016, 30.7% of the population in the Fenelon Falls area (including Coboconk) was 65 years old or older. The proportion of seniors living in this area increased from 22.4% in 2006. In contrast, the population of Ontario aged 65 and over is 16.7% (Statistics Canada, 2018). Senior populations tend to be at higher risks for health issues, and require greater medical services. The Canadian Medical Association (CMA) notes that almost “three-quarters of Canadians over 65 have at least one chronic health condition” and that 44% of provincial health care funds are consumed by this demographic (CMA, 2013). Providing timely and quality services to seniors is a priority and it is important to ensure capacity exists to serve this population in the Coboconk area, especially as the number of residents in this age demographic continues to grow.

With an aging, rural population, it is important to ensure permanent medical services continue to operate in Coboconk. Compounding the need for local care is fact is the lack of rural transit and other nearby medical facilities in the area. For residents of Coboconk that do not have access to a vehicle, there is currently no regular public transit that can assist their travel to other centres

for medical and health appointments. Maintaining medical services within Coboconk is therefore even more important as it provides an accessible option for residents without vehicle access.

There are many residents in the Coboconk area who are not served locally by the Coboconk Medical Centre. The current doctor has a full patient load, and no new patients can be supported. In addition, there is no local after-hours clinic in Coboconk. Enhanced and specialty medical and health care, such as dental services and physiotherapy are unavailable in the area. Coboconk remains underserved for medical and health care, a vital challenge especially as a rural community with a high average aging population.

## **Project Proposal**

Residents and organizations in the City have approached the current challenges with the Coboconk Medical Centre with a vision for opportunity. This vision is to provide quality medical and wellness services to the residents of Coboconk and surrounding areas by establishing a permanent wellness centre in the historic Coboconk Train Station. The facility will continue to provide the medical services available today, while also enhancing services provided and creating programs to maintain a healthy and active population.

## **Coboconk Train Station Facility**

The Coboconk Train Station is located at the north end of Coboconk in Legion Park. The facility is 4,446 square feet in size and is owned by the City of Kawartha Lakes. There are three floors in the facility; a basement, main and top floor. Currently, only the basement floor is used by the community and is rented out as a community facility for various meetings and functions. This floor includes a kitchen and meeting space. However, utilization of the facility is low, and new functions are needed to bring life back to the Station.

It is proposed that the main and top floors of the existing Coboconk Train Station facility be renovated to accommodate permanent medical services in the community. This proposal solves two issues: first it provides a permanent facility for the provision of medical and health services, and it also provides a new use for the under-utilized train station building.

The main and top floors of the facility would be renovated into several medical suites. The size of the train station (4,446 square feet), being larger than the ideal facility size (3,500 square feet) determined by staff, would enable multiple units for improved medical services. This would allow for at least two general/family medical practitioners to operate out of the space, increasing the capacity to serve the residents of Coboconk and area. Additional suites would be available for other practices, such as dentistry and physiotherapy. Partnerships with the Coboconk Medical Trust Association and the Kawartha Lakes Health Care Initiative will help to attract new doctors to the space. By renovating this space and attracting more and specialized medical and wellness services to the Coboconk area, the community will be better equipped to meet the needs of the rural, aging population in a locally accessible area. Renovating this facility would also have impacts for the residents of neighbouring communities, increasing their access to medical and health services as well.

Through this proposal, the City of Kawartha Lakes will continue to own the facility. A Management Committee will be established to oversee the renovations of the facility and the management of the facility.

## **Celebrating Local History**

There is a long history connected to the Coboconk Train Station. Restoration, renovation and revitalization of this facility will enable this local history to be preserved and celebrated.

The original Coboconk Train Station was believed to have been built in 1872, and served as the terminus of the Toronto-Nipissing Railway (Cooper, 2009). The railway transported grain and firewood from the northern points on the track into Toronto (Cooper, 2008). In 1908, the original building was hit by lightning and destroyed. However, a second station was built to replace the first and continued to operate until 1965 (Cooper, 2009).

After the railway discontinued operation, the Coboconk Train Station continued to be used by the community and was moved to what is now Legion Park in Coboconk.

As part of the reconstruction of the Coboconk Train Station for medical and wellness services, a portion of the facility will be dedicated to showcasing the history of the facility. Within the building, a small museum and associated displays will document the history of the building and the Coboconk area allowing patients, residents and visitors the opportunity to celebrate the historic impact of the building on their community for so many years.

## **Engaged Stakeholders**

The renovation of the Coboconk Train Station into a permanent medical facility, as well as the renewed management and operation of Legion Park is one that involves many stakeholders. To date, 18 stakeholder groups have been engaged in the process, many of which were engaged through a public meeting on May 29<sup>th</sup>. Each group involved has indicated they are supportive and enthusiastic about proceeding with the proposed project. A list of the key stakeholders involved in this project is provided below.

**Coboconk, Norland & Area Chamber of Commerce**

**Coboconk Railway Restoration Committee**

**Coboconk Medical Centre Trust**

**Kawartha Lakes Health Care Initiative**

**City of Kawartha Lakes – Parks, Recreation and Culture**

## **Alignment with Local Priorities**

The need for this project is not only reflected in the statistics and voices of the community, but in the priorities set by local government. The 2016-2019 City of Kawartha Lakes Strategic Plan

sets the vision for Kawartha Lakes: naturally beautiful, offering an exceptional lifestyle. The proposed project would help Kawartha Lakes to deliver on this vision, specifically as it relates to Goal 2 of the plan: an exceptional quality of life.

Goal 2 in the Strategic Plan sets actions to “strengthen existing cultural and heritage assets” and “enhance access to Community and Human/Health Services.” This project will help achieve this goal by renovating the Coboconk Train Station, a historical feature, including a portion of the renovated facility dedicated to the history of the Station and the surrounding area. This project will also enhance access to health services in Kawartha Lakes through the establishment of a permanent health facility with expanded health and medical services.

This project is also well aligned with the City’s Economic Development Strategy, specifically achieving actions under Goal 3: Encourage a positive community business culture. Under this goal, the City has set an action to “support community based organizations in local development activities”. The proposed project would generate significant economic benefits for the community, and is certainly a local economic development project. Not only will this project create jobs during renovation and reconstruction; there will be a maintained positive economic impact as new doctors and attracted and retained in Coboconk and new residents and families find it an attractive place to settle with good access to medical care.

## References

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