

Municipality Of Chatham-Kent

Corporate Services

Information Report

To: Mayor and Members of Council
From: Leanne Segeren-Swayze, Director, Customer Services
Date: April 7, 2021
Subject: Municipal Information Desks – Temporary Closures Continued

This report is for the information of Council.

Background

On March 20, 2020 at the onset of the COVID-19 corona virus pandemic, the Municipality was facing immediate closures of most municipal facilities, including service centres and municipal information desks.

To ensure access to application submissions and payments of essential services, administration developed a business continuity plan to create a seamless experience for the customer. This plan included the following initiatives:

Customer Communication

Media releases were regularly issued announcing office closings/re-openings.

Payment and service options were communicated through social media, the CK website and posters affixed to municipal customer service buildings.

Automatic messaging was changed regularly on the 519 360-1998 line to provide the most up-to-date information regarding service changes and in an effort to minimize the number of times a customer service representative was spending time repeating a similar message.

Service Delivery Modifications

Where offices were closed, customer service representatives were re-assigned to virtual call centre duties often executed from a remote work location. The team was set up with appropriate technology to manage a high volume of incoming calls. The evolution of the virtual call centre technology since its inception in 2014 has proven highly valuable during the pandemic as well as during other emergency situations that required 24/7 call centre services this year. Customer service representatives have been able to connect from home at any hour of any day to assist customers and disseminate incoming customer information to the emergency operations teams.

For essential services (death registrations, burial permits, bus passes, marriage licences, car dealership licensing requirements, emergency Ontario Health Card issuance, etc) not conducive to electronic transactions, a plan was implemented to ensure safe and secured on-site access. Customers were pre-screened and scheduled for appointments in deference to “walk-ins”. Alternative service delivery methods were also implemented to reduce unnecessary physical contact between customers and municipal staff. A few examples of these alternative services included:

- Secured drop box payments were made available in any municipal centre/municipal information desk (payments/documentation were collected regularly for processing)
- Documentation for permits, licences, etc. were temporarily accepted via fax and email (a temporary legislative change that made this possible). In turn, the completed permits and licences were either mailed or emailed to the customers within 24 hours.
- Phone registrations and curbside pickups were implemented for various recreation Programs/Services (ie camp in a box).

From the period of July to September, the customer service team were slowly able to re-introduce counter services in all municipal centres and ServiceOntario offices following the implementation of “customer ready” personal protective equipment (PPE) protocols (masking, social distanced customer queues, installation of plastic barriers, distancing signage/limitations, customer screening, etc.). Municipal Information Desks continued to remain closed due to challenges associated with being able to achieve requisite safety measures if re-opened as well as the need to ensure that sufficient staffing remained available in offices where foot traffic had now increased.

The contracted services of ServiceOntario in Chatham and Dresden came under particular pressure with extraordinary numbers of patrons from both inside and outside Chatham-Kent attending these offices since other privately run offices were offering reduced hours or not yet open. Significant daily wait times were experienced until appointment-only services were introduced in early November, 2020 which greatly improved the overall customer experience with the elimination of extensive wait times.

The following call volume statistics demonstrate a clear understanding of why periodic call-wait times for customers became an issue:

Statistic period	Volume of Calls
2019	92,380
2020	109,730

*Call volume increase since COVID: 17,350

In October 2020, CK 311 was officially launched, following 18 months of preparation, approvals and programming. The implementation timing was ideal, offering simplified access to our contact centre for the purpose of obtaining municipal/community information, service options, service requests and permits/registrations/licences, etc.

Municipal Centres continue to operate regular business hours and offer regular services. Municipal Information Desks have remained closed, resulting from the mandatory closure of libraries and the challenges associated with separating the customer service area from library operations (ie curbside services).

Comments

At this time, the three MIDs remain closed to the public for the following reasons:

- Libraries remain closed to the public (shared space)
- Costs associated with office readiness to separate the office space from library when offices cannot yet be re-opened safely
- Ensuring that staff typically assigned to MID locations are kept available for reassigned work to peak volume locations and/or the virtual call centre

However, the complete menu of services continue to be made available to residents that typically patronized these locations. Customers may choose from any of the following options, to access services and information:

- MID secured drop-boxes (payments, applications and documentation)
- Call 311 (519 360-1998) – Customer service will provide service options, specific to the service request
- Email ck311@chatham-kent.ca and include inquiry or request details
- Visit www.chatham-kent.ca to access applications and service information
- Attend nearest municipal centre for full service options - Blenheim, Chatham Civic Centre, Dresden, Ridgetown, Tilbury and Wallaceburg (Monday to Friday; 8:30am-4:30pm)

In March 2021 council directed administration to undertake a service review on Service Centres, Municipal Information Desks and Customer Service Delivery and to report back to Council before fall of 2021. In addition to payment and transactional methodologies, Council also directed administration to consider consolidation of services for the purposes of reviewing options with respect to building divestment. This service review is now underway and is still scheduled to be completed on time.

If the pandemic numbers decline, it is conceivable that libraries may be permitted to start re-opening, though this is unlikely to happen any time soon. If it does, however, an office readiness assessment would have to be conducted based on provincial requirements and materials ordered, then implemented. In consideration of this unknown with respect to timing and the fact that a service review is currently underway, it is administration's intention, unless otherwise directed by Council, to not re-open MIDs

until after Council has deliberated on the recommendations stemming from the service review.

Consultation

Library services were consulted for the purpose of this report.

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