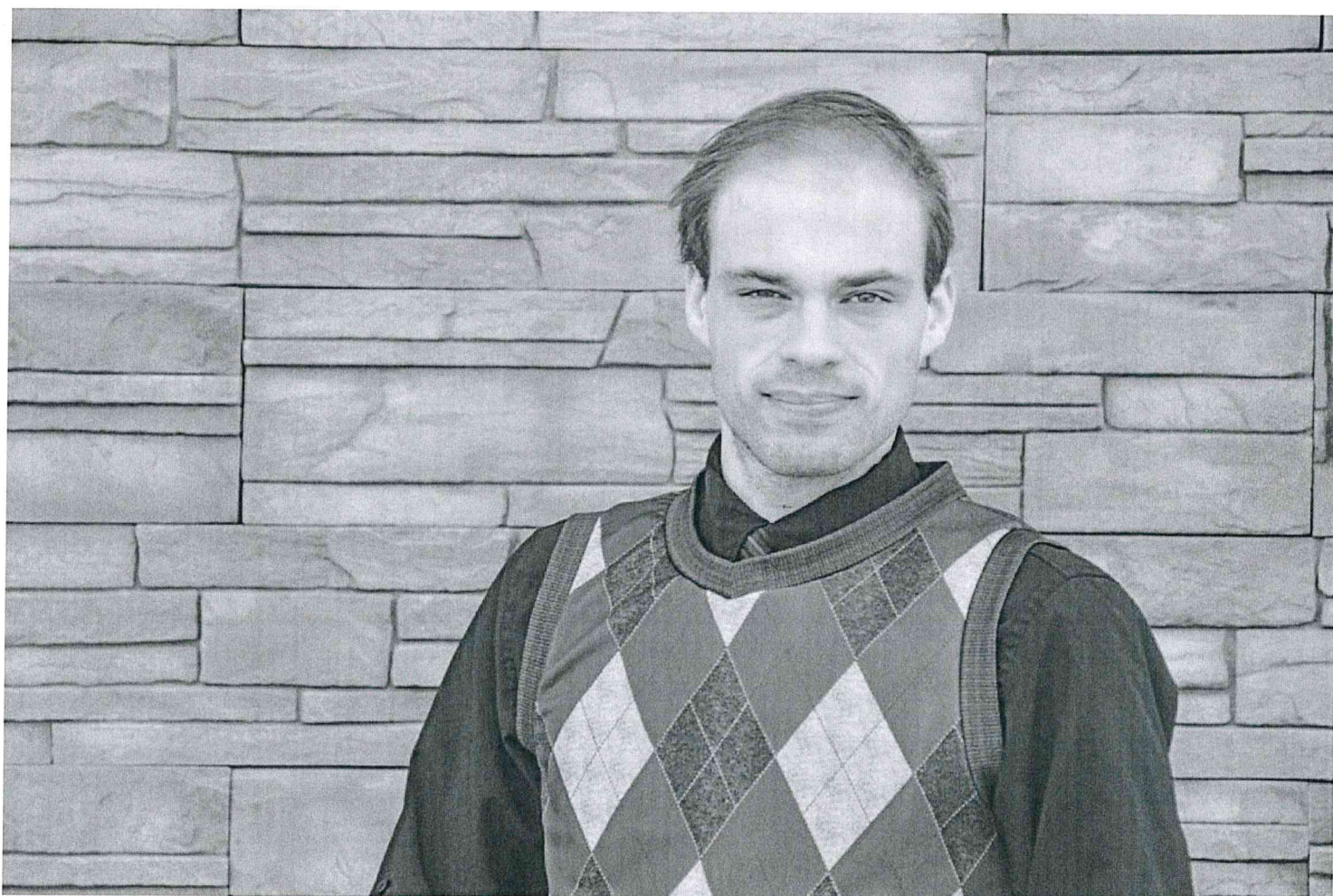


Soos advocates for Indigenous mobile crisis unit



Mike Balsom

May 4, 2023 2:45 PM



Community activist Steven Soos. / Don Rickers

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Steven Soos admits his rebel heart often gets him into trouble, but that won't stop the self-professed dreamer from continuing his advocacy to mitigate Niagara's mental health, homelessness and addiction crisis.

After two years he finally convinced Niagara's regional councillors to invoke a state of emergency on the three issues in March. Some might have thought that victory would be the last they would hear from the 29-year-old Welland resident.

But he was just getting started.

Soos, who self-identifies as Metis based on his grandfather's background, has turned his focus to Niagara's Indigenous community. He wants to see government funding for an Indigenous mental health mobile crisis unit pilot project to specifically address the mental health, homelessness and addiction problem for members of that community.

"I called the NRNC (Niagara Regional Native Centre) to explain to them how I felt as an Indigenous person fighting for my emergency," Soos tells The Local. "I want the Indigenous community involved in this. We're disproportionately affected by these issues. We're the issue within the issue."

Soos says Willow Shawanoo, outreach coordinator at NRNC, provided him with a great summary of what a mobile crisis unit would need. He reached out to Niagara Centre MP Vance Badawey, who is also the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Indigenous Services.

"He said he just needs a proposal from one of Niagara's Indigenous-led organizations who would be willing to host this," Soos says of his discussion with Badawey, also of Metis heritage.

Soos says the Indigenous community of Niagara works as a collective. Besides Shawanoo, Soos has also spoken to Wendy Sturgeon of the Niagara Chapter of Native Women, Jackie Poulin of NPAAMB (Niagara Peninsula Aboriginal Area Management Board) and to the Friendship Centres of Ontario, who have all supported his quest.

Asked what his vision of a mobile crisis unit would be, Soos doesn't hesitate.

"We want cars, and there are provincial grants that will help us buy the vehicles," he explains. "We would have a talk therapy option, too. We will show that Indigenous people can lead their own futures on this. We've been doing wellness and recovery forever. Look at the tradition of healing lodges."

Soos says he has been offered a meeting with provincial Minister of Indigenous Affairs Greg Rickford, thanks largely to the help of (Niagara West MPP) Sam Oosterhoff.

"We should be treating mental health, homelessness and addiction as public health matters with a public health response," insists Soos, "and not as criminal or police matters. Ultimately, we want

these calls rerouted away from police and to healthcare professionals, and this pilot project and Niagara's resilient Indigenous community will show the province and the country this is possible."

The graduate of Trent University with a double major in international development and philosophy does his homework. That allows him to make a financial case for the mobile unit as well.

"This will save a lot of money down the road in criminal justice," he adds, "because you are giving people culturally appropriate service. The workers of the project will be loaded with Indigenous knowledge, therefore preventing further police escalation, criminalization and discrimination of our people. Think of the savings in police budgets when they have to respond to less."

And there is much more that the tireless advocate has been continuing to fight for.

He's pushing for the addition of warning labels on all alcohol products, including wines sold at all Niagara area wineries.

At press time, he was hoping to meet Paul Calandra, Ontario's Minister for Long Term Care, during the MP's visit to Beamsville Tuesday. He shared with The Local a letter he submitted to Calandra in advance of the meeting, in which he outlined his ideas for a companionship service for seniors, an app to match the elderly with home care workers, and the need for more support workers in LTC homes.

He has ideas and opinions on the housing affordability crisis, as well.

"Young people are exiled from the housing market," Soos laments. "And I've seen seniors in Welland begging on the streets for food more than ever. Seniors and young people are facing similar issues. We're the ones being punished the most in this affordability emergency."

And he is certain that the emergency declaration can be used to convince the province to allow all of Niagara's hospitals to be saved, and to get new shelters built to house the homeless 24 hours a day and to take in victims of domestic abuse.

Soos himself has spent time on the streets. The longtime sufferer from Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and anxiety says a difficult living situation at the beginning of the pandemic led to his own addiction problems. He ended up on the street and felt abandoned by his family and friends.

As his mental health and drug addiction spiralled out of control, he began his crusade for change in Niagara. He found an ally early on in Niagara Falls regional councillor Wayne Campbell, whose daughter Katey ended her own life 10 years ago after struggling with the same issues.

In conversation, Soos, who himself has thrown his hat into the ring unsuccessfully five times for municipal councils in Peterborough, Welland and Pelham, talks a mile a minute, jumping from topic to topic, from issue to issue, his voice rising in volume. It's easy to see why some politicians are put off by his approach.

But many are listening. Niagara-on-the-Lake regional councillor Andrea Kaiser says Soos reached out to her personally after reading in *The Local* about Kaiser overcoming her own struggles with anxiety at one point in her life.

Kaiser, who adds that she never hesitated to support the motion to declare an emergency in Niagara, is impressed with Soos' advocacy on the Indigenous mobile mental health unit.

"I think we need to be creative about solutions," Kaiser says. "The mobile health unit is a great example of thinking outside the box. We can get so set in our ways in government. Because of his passion, his laser focus, it seems he is able to affect change more particularly on that issue because he doesn't have to focus on everything else."

Soos hasn't totally given up on politics, though. He is now hoping to vie for a seat on Canada's senate.

Since July 2016, the federal government has invited qualified Canadians to apply to be senators. An arms-length advisory board assesses nominees and applicants based on a set of criteria.

Thorold city councillor Carmen DeRose, among others, supports Soos' application for the position. He thinks having a young senator like Soos with his motivation to do good for the community would be an asset to the upper chamber.

"I think he has a lot to offer," says DeRose. "He's so well-rounded, articulate and intelligent. He just has to stay clean and focus on what he's doing. His best intentions are for the community, his fellow Canadians who have passed away with mental health and addiction problems. The senate needs some fresh blood."

His quest for a senate seat is just one example of how he looks at every possibility. Another is how he has been sending tweets and messages to former Canadian resident Elon Musk, asking the multi-billionaire for his monetary support on the three issues.

And he's not afraid to contact officials at all political levels in his quest to be heard. Besides taking his advocacy to all 12 Niagara municipalities and the region he has also reached out to various different ministers both federally and provincially, and promises to continue doing so.

"I want the UN (United Nations) Secretary General to issue a statement to condemn discrimination of the mentally ill, the homeless and the addicted around the globe," he says. "And I'm going through the ambassador Bob Rae to do it. I'll contact anybody."

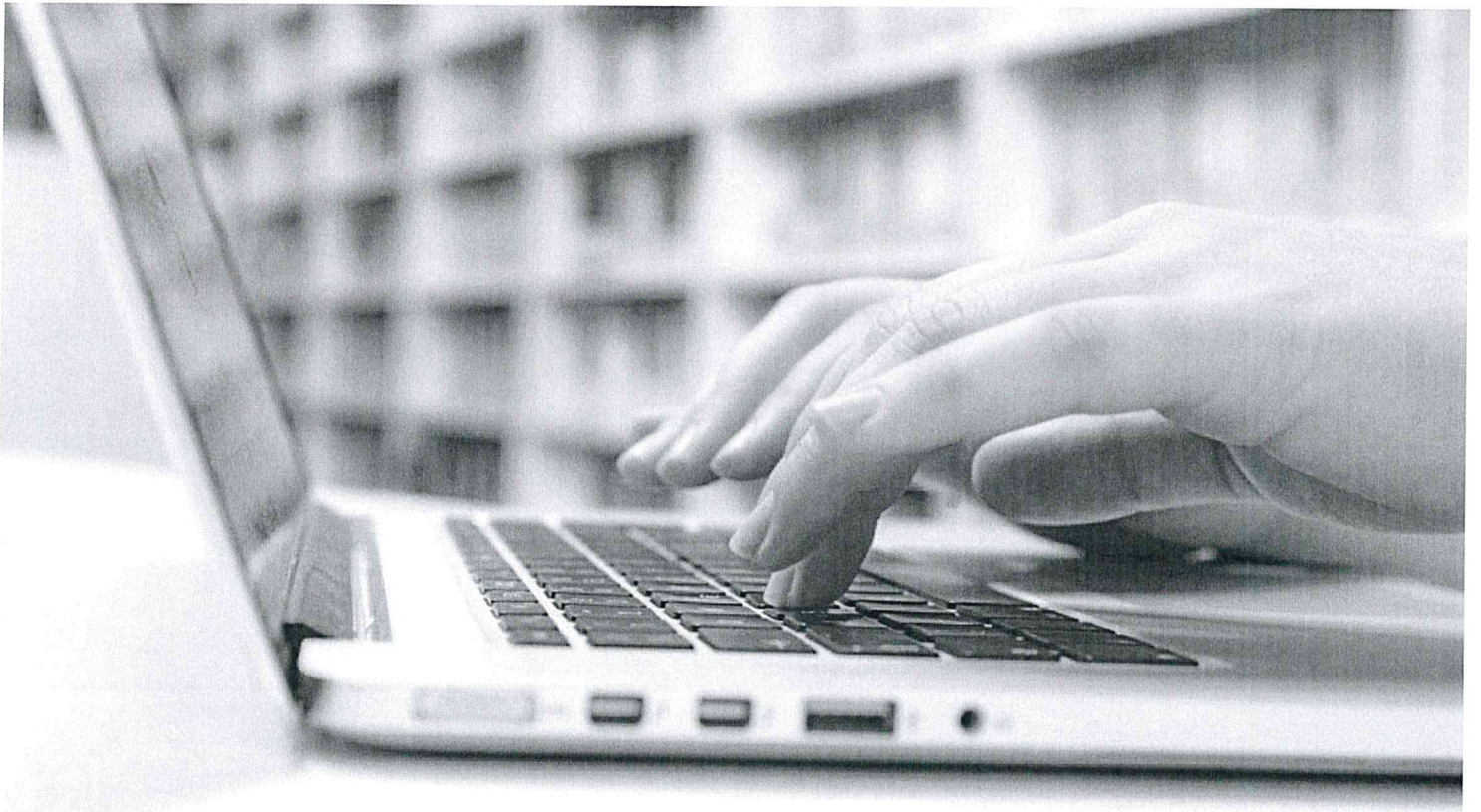
Soos says 10 to 15 people stop him on the street daily to applaud him for his efforts. He feels that his advocacy on mental health, homelessness and addiction is his destiny.

"I want Niagara to mitigate this mental health, homelessness and addiction emergency," he says. "We may never end it completely, but I'm willing to go to war for my family and friends. The suffering needs to end in this region."

Comments (0)

LETTER: Government responses to the mental health, addiction and homelessness emergency

Letter to the Editor
May 24, 2023 7:00 AM



/ Donatello Trisolino via Pexels

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00:03:55

This is an update on how governments have taken on actionable policies and how their financial commitments address this emergency in Niagara (also declared by Toronto [homelessness only],

Hamilton, Grimsby [no homelessness emergency- but adds a housing affordability emergency], Niagara Falls, Thorold, St Catharines, and Welland).

Ontario Government response to emergency (an increase to services without burdening the Niagara ratepayer):

1. \$425 million dollars (Ontario-wide) with a 5% increase to Ministry of Health-led organizations who provide mental health and addiction services, such as Pathstone Children's Mental Health. (Niagara Allocation TBD)
2. \$10 million dollars in new funding for Indigenous Supported Housing (Niagara Allocation TBD)
3. \$20.8 million dollars for homelessness prevention exclusively for Niagara Region
4. Premier Doug Ford's commitment to building more drug-rehab treatment facilities in Niagara Region.

Local government actions for the emergency (based on recommendations submitted to Niagara's Civic leaders by myself)

1. City of Hamilton is exploring a facilitated process for members of the public to take in someone privately who is homeless to take stress off an overworked, understaffed and long underfunded mental health, homelessness and addiction system(s)
2. Grimsby Town Council has endorsed the establishment of a domestic abuse focused emergency shelter in Niagara West
3. Grimsby Town Council has also endorsed requesting the Ontario government fund full mental health and addictions services (with the appropriate staffing) in the West Lincoln Memorial Hospital
4. St. Catharines City Council unanimously condemned the discrimination of people experiencing mental health, homelessness and addiction within the city jurisdiction

I have also asked the Town of Pelham to consider the following motion:

Request for Town of Pelham Council Endorsements:

1. That the Town of Pelham endorse the Niagara Region, City of Hamilton, motions declaring states of emergency for mental health, homelessness, addiction
2. That the Town of Pelham endorse Town of Grimsby motion declaring declare a housing affordability emergency
3. That the Town of Pelham endorse City of St. Catharines motion condemning the discrimination of the mentally ill, homeless and addicted

4. That the Town of Pelham endorse City of Toronto motion declaring a state of emergency on homelessness

Actions for Pelham Town Council on Reconciliation:

1. That the Town of Pelham commit to highlighting and showcasing more literature on Indigenous wellness in the Town of Pelham library
2. That the Town of Pelham endorse Steven Soos' initiative for an Indigenous mobile mental health crisis unit pilot project for the Niagara Region

Actions for the mental health, homelessness and addictions emergency within the developmental services sector:

1. That the Town of Pelham request that the Ford government commit to more funding for residential services for adults and children struggling with an intellectual and/or developmental disability. That the Ford government also commit to addressing lengthy waitlists for supportive housing options to people with developmental and/or intellectual disabilities
2. That the Town of Pelham also request the Ford government commit to addressing the lengthy waitlists and address funding/staffing gaps to autism services
3. That the Ford government commit to assisting in the recruiting of Developmental Support Workers to address the shortage of workers for developmental disability services

Steven Soos

Welland

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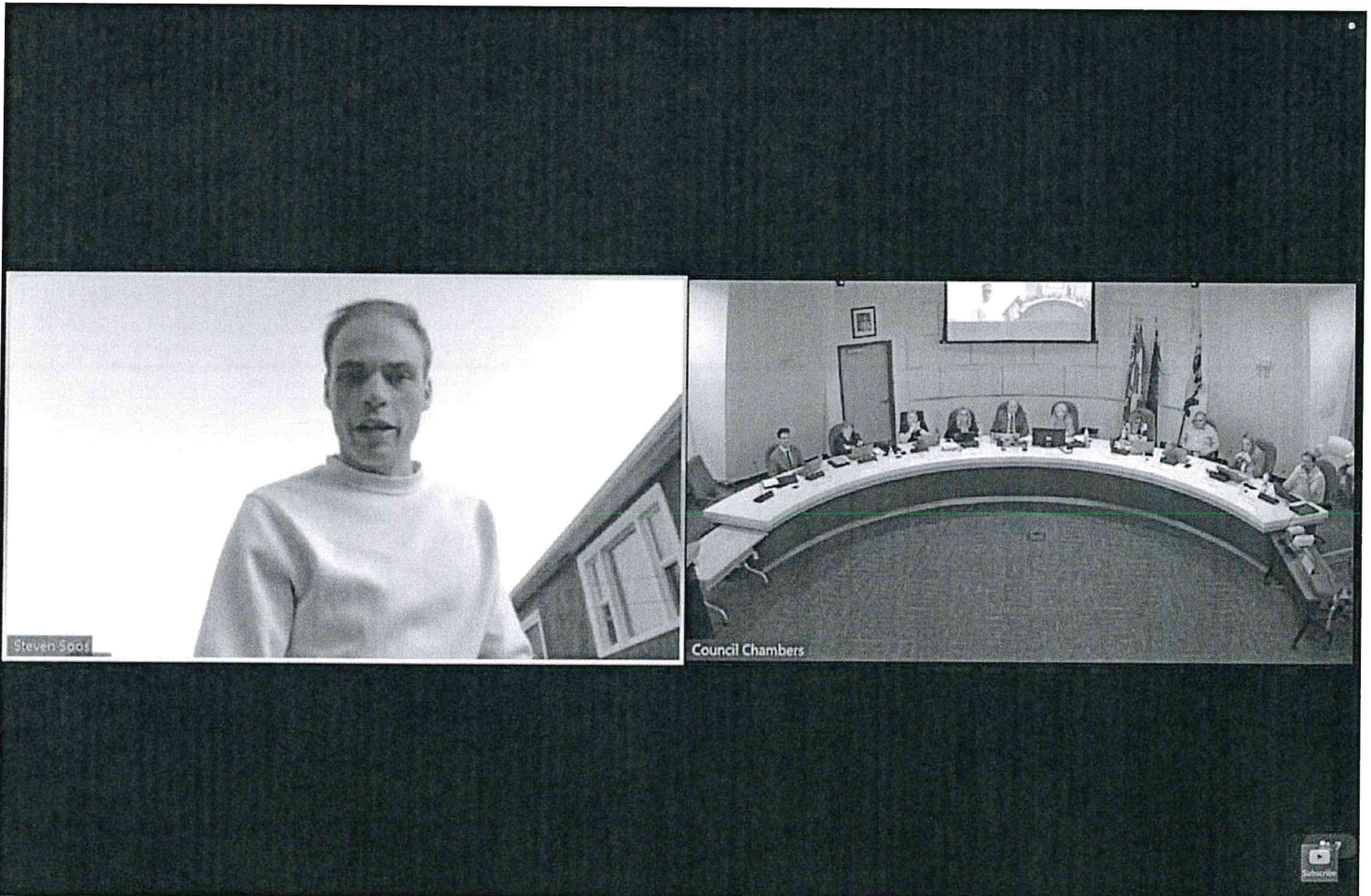
Mental heath advocate stops in Grimsby to ask council for support

Grimsby council voted to declare a state of emergency and crisis on mental health, addiction, and housing affordability

By Abby Green Grimsby Lincoln News

May 17, 2023

Article was updated May 19, 2023



Mental health advocate Steven Soos delegated at Grimsby council on May 15 to push for the town to declare a state of emergency on mental health, addiction, and housing affordability. - Abby Green/ Youtube screenshot

Steven Soos is making the rounds to all of Niagara's municipalities, getting councils to push for more mental health supports.

On May 15, he visited Grimsby council, asking councillors to declare a state of emergency and crisis on mental health, addiction, and housing affordability.

In a lengthy resolution, Soos, with the help of Coun. Jacob Baradziej noted that travelling to other cities for services continues to be a challenge for residents in Grimsby.

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In the resolution, council agreed to ask the province for more funding for the West Lincoln Memorial Hospital, "so that the hospital may be a fully staffed/functional hospital with built-in mental health and addiction services."

It also calls on MP Dean Allison and MPP Sam Oosterhoff to speak with their colleagues about more funding to assist with mental health, homelessness and addiction.

Additionally, his motion calls for these officials to advocate for the establishment of an emergency domestic abuse shelter that would service Niagara West.

While most councillors seemed to be on board with the motion in theory, some of them had problems with the details.

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"Even when we're looking at providing more money to the hospital, do we know that the hospital has the resources, that they have the size in order to accommodate?" asked Coun. Veronica Charrois.

Coun. Lianne Vardy also felt it needed tweaking, and made a motion to refer it back to staff. Her motion was shot down.

"I'm just going to say sometimes the devil's in the details and sometimes it's better maybe to leave some details out that you'll be more likely to be successful," she said.

Ultimately, Soos said it's better to ask than not to.

"I got a response from the deputy prime minister. I've been getting responses from cabinet ministers. It's unreal. If you don't ask, you don't get an answer. So let's ask," he said.

Coun. Delight Davoli said her family has been impacted by the issue as well, as she has lost a family member to addiction.

While she agreed that she thought at first it had too much detail, she ultimately decided it's better to just get started.

"Truly, at the end of the day, we just need to move forward on it," she said. "This resolution is very encompassing. Some things will come true. Some will not. Some we will be able to do and will have success in some areas and some not. But most importantly, we need to move forward with that. And so for those reasons, I unequivocally support it."

The motion received council's support, with only Coun. Don Howe voting against it.
