

Full Authority
21 April 2022
Agenda Item: 14

COVID Protocols

Background

- As everyone knows, COVID has been an ongoing concern since March 2020 and created a situation with many unknowns that resulted in changes to protocols as the world tried to grasp with the significant threat it posed. Many thousands of people have died in Canada and millions around the world. Serious long term health issues have also arisen with many people after catching COVID.
- In order to help protect the CVCA Board, staff and the public, a set of protocols were implemented by the CVCA. They included measures based on the measures instituted by the Province of Ontario, recommendations by the local health authorities and the circumstances of this Authority.
- Over the two year period that COVID changed our working environment, the CVCA has always sought to protect staff to help ensure that our staff complement is not severely compromised, especially those required to work on dams at key times of the year. We must have enough trained staff to be able to manage the watershed system, provide this service on a 365 day basis, issue flood warnings when necessary and staff the office 24 hours a day during a flood. In addition, the regulations and planning department was still required to process applications and planning submissions at a time when these items continued to increase exponentially from COVID related pressures.
- As a result, the CVCA implemented the following in the early stages of COVID:
 - i. For staff who could work from home, they did so for approximately 3 months, but then returned to work due to volume issues
 - ii. Contact tracing
 - iii. Social distancing
 - iv. Masks to be worn in the office
 - v. One person per vehicle
 - vi. Vaccine Policy adopted
 - vii. Stay at home if exposed to COVID – return based on test results and Provincial guideline (14 days self isolation)
 - viii. Virtual Board Meetings
 - ix. Office Closed to the Public
 - x. Site inspections allowed, but staff instructed to maintain social distance and mask if applicant or their agent is on site

- As COVID has progressed, Provincial directives have changed based on case counts and hospitalizations. As everyone is now aware, many COVID restrictions have now been lifted, which has resulted in a shift of responsibilities from the Province to the individual. In the CVCA workplace, there remains a concern that COVID could still have a significant detrimental effect on the overall capacity of the organization, even though the disease may not be as severe for individuals.
- Therefore, moving forward to manage a continually evolving COVID situation, we will need to be flexible to serve the public and our municipalities, yet protect our staff to help ensure the majority of staff do not end up with COVID all at the same time.
- Recognizing that the infection rate is as high now or ever during this pandemic, it is in the best interests of staff and the Board to remain vigilant in order that we do not have an outbreak at the office that could jeopardize our ability to perform our daily duties and uphold our responsibilities as an emergency hazard agency.
- This is vital, especially during periods when either a significant number of stop logs have been removed from our dams (the spring freshet) or when stop logs need to be replaced to capture enough of the freshet to ensure summer elevation levels are attained. One can only imagine in either scenario if we did not have the staff to conduct these vital adjustments.

Sick Time

- Since the beginning of COVID, the CVCA has remained fortunate to not have any actual staff cases until recently. With the onslaught of the 6th wave, three staff members have now contracted COVID. Each case individual reaction to the virus varies and therefore the length of the absence will be different.
- At this time, the average duration of symptoms is 7 to 10 days for younger staff, while one case has exceeded that time. In order to avoid staff to staff transmission, staff have been required to remain at home until symptoms have cleared to help ensure virus shedding is no longer a possibility at work.
- Staff are concerned that sick credits are being used up for just this disease leaving them no credits at all for other ailments. The few extra days will encourage staff to stay home.
- Should the illness extend beyond five working days, the CVCA Short Term Disability Policy could be utilized.

- Currently, the CVCA sick credits are 6 days per year and the days cannot be accumulated from year to year.

Recommendation:

That the CVCA sick credits be increased to 10 days per year and five days could be carried over from year to year for a maximum allotment of 15 per year.

Board Meetings

The CVCA has been able to effectively conduct virtual Board Meetings despite the occasional technical blip with the internet here at the office and other rural locations. In fact, compared to other meetings held virtually, the CVCA has been quite successful in conducting business.

In eastern Ontario, there is a range of solutions for Board meetings and it is fairly evenly split between: 1) a return to Board meetings held at conservation authority offices, 2) a hybrid model where some Board members meet at the office and others attend virtually and 3) maintaining virtual meetings for all Board members.

As a reminder, it is not possible to have meetings here at the CVCA Office and adhere to social distancing.

CVCA staff have considered using a hybrid model, however we have neither the equipment to do so, nor do we have the internet capacity to allow multiple users on at the same time from our office.

We must also consider the comfort level of individual Board members and their decisions about their own health safety. Regarding the broader issue of hospitalization, I believe we also have an obligation to help keep people out of the hospital system and we do that by continuing to reduce our contact, especially in an indoor session. Doctors, nurses and other hospital staff have been under so much pressure for so long and every contribution we can make to reduce that strain is a positive step for all of us.

Recommendation:

- 1) That the CVCA Board meetings continue to remain virtual meetings until the 6th wave abates to a level that reduces the risk to the Board Members and staff.***
- 2) That the CVCA Board recognizes the fluidity of the situation and should consider revisiting the issue at the September Board meeting.***

Office Reopening

Similar to every other conservation authority office, for the past two years the CVCA office has remained closed to walk in traffic, while continuing to conduct normal business. This closure has not had a negative impact on any of the programs and services offered by the CVCA, including the Regulations Department.

The office has been meeting the needs of the public and this has been evident even in the face of the unprecedented increase in permits, planning, property inquiry reviews and general public communications either by phone or emails.

As part of the CVCA's office closure protocol, the public has had access to a Regulations Officer to meet on site when required with masks and staff continue to adhere to social distancing. The public has been requested to do the same and CVCA staff will continue to make that request during the 6th wave.

The public has been very supportive of these procedures and respected the CVCA's system. At the time of this report, there have been no complaints and our Regulations program is approximately two weeks ahead of last year's pace. As well, the process of using e-mails has actually resulted in a documented "paper trail" of questions and answers that has largely removed ambiguity from the permit process.

Once again, if too many staff are sick at the same time for too long or overlapping periods of absences, the regulations permits and planning reviews will end up suffering and potentially cause significant delays in approvals for the public. CVCA staff wish to avoid that at all costs.

Once the 6th wave has abated, the CVCA may wish to consider opening to the public by appointment only. This is an option the staff had requested prior to the pandemic as well.

Recommendation:

That the CVCA office continue to remain closed due to the 6th wave in order to help address the CVCA staff's health and safety and operational concerns. This will help to ensure staffing shortages and continue to operate at a high level of efficiency, especially during the permitting/building season.