



Committee Report

To:	Warden Hicks and Members of Grey County Council
Committee Date:	September 9, 2021
Subject / Report No:	EDTC-CW-14-21
Title:	COVID-19 Survey Partnership - University of Guelph
Prepared by:	Steve Furness and Brad Noble
Reviewed by:	Randy Scherzer
Lower Tier(s) Affected:	All
Status:	

Recommendation

1. That Report EDTC-CW-14-21 regarding the COVID-19 Survey Partnership with the University of Guelph be received for information.

Executive Summary

Grey County has joined a partnership with the University of Guelph to implement a COVID survey county-wide to Grey County residents. The survey has already been completed in two counties in Ontario (Huron and Perth) and will be completed in another six counties including Grey County. The survey aims to find out how the pandemic has changed the daily lives of rural residents and how residents think it will change their lives moving forward. Results from the survey may be useful for a variety of projects and may assist future decision-making by both County and local municipalities regarding pandemic recovery efforts. The costs associated with the survey will be primarily funded by Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA) with an additional \$5,000 being funded by the County through existing departmental budgets to assist with survey distribution costs.

Background and Discussion

Like all Ontarians, rural residents have been impacted immensely by the ongoing COVID-19 Pandemic. Rural communities often have unique characteristics and rural residents may be affected by the pandemic in ways that have not yet been fully realized. Dr. Leith Deacon, associate professor of environmental design and rural development at the University of Guelph has embarked on research to gather experiences from rural residents in Ontario. The goal of this research is to provide rural residents the opportunity to have their voice heard on how the pandemic has impacted their life. This individual-level survey asks residents about life before

COVID-19 and life currently in 2021, to provide critical data to inform policy development in rural communities.

In August 2021, Grey County joined a partnership with the University of Guelph to implement a COVID survey county-wide to Grey County residents. Examining a total of eight counties from Ontario (Bruce, Dufferin, Elgin, Grey, Lambton, Renfrew, plus already completed Huron and Perth), this mixed-method project (i.e., surveys and interviews) examines well-being (e.g., mental health), social behaviour (e.g., employment-impacted behaviour), day-to-day living (e.g., shopping habits) and risk management (e.g., accessing existing services). The survey aims to find out how the pandemic has changed rural residents' daily lives and how residents think it will change their lives moving forward.

The Grey County survey is currently being refined by County staff and Professor Deacon, with implementation by mail planned for September 2021. Grey County funding for the project is provided by OMAFRA in the amount of \$15,000, with an additional \$5000 being provided by the County, shared equally between the existing budgets of the departments of Economic Development, Social Services, and Planning. The total amount of \$20,000 will be used for mail-out costs for homes in Grey County. The research results will be collected and analyzed by the University of Guelph. Grey County will have access to the results of this research and it is anticipated that these results will fill an important gap in our understanding of how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted Grey County residents. Results from the survey may be useful for a variety of projects and may be critical information for future decision-making by both County and local municipal departments and councils with respect to planning pandemic recovery efforts. Any personal information collected as part of the survey will not be disclosed to the County and the County will not be able to correlate any information received from the University to come up with personal information. If, however, personal information was disclosed to the County, then the County's responsibilities under the Municipal Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (MFIPPA) would apply.

The six case studies (Bruce, Dufferin, Elgin, Grey, Lambton, Renfrew, plus already completed Huron and Perth) will be a proxy to enable province-wide support to be identified and further developed to help ensure strong rural communities. Additionally, results will be able to be coalesced into geographic regions (e.g., provincial- and/or county-level, lower and/or upper tier municipalities) to support province-wide decisions but also, county-specific decisions/recommendations.

This project will:

1. Identify vulnerabilities that have been exposed during COVID-19, some of which that have been long-recognized but exacerbated by the pandemic, but also new vulnerabilities that require additional support and policy change [supporting methods: quantitative survey and qualitative interviews/focus groups];
2. Evaluate existing response plans and policies that have been successful in supporting rural communities during the COVID-19 pandemic [supporting methods: literature review, quantitative survey, qualitative interviews/focus groups];
3. Recommend how the various levels of government can collaborate to support rural communities and address the vulnerabilities that have been exposed in rural populations [supporting method: coalescing results from project].

At the conclusion of the project Dr. Leith plans to attend Grey County Council to present and discuss results of the study, and to answer questions from County Council. The Ontario Agri-Food Innovation Alliance is a collaboration between OMAFRA and the University of Guelph to advance research and innovation that contributes to the success of the province's agri-food sector and promotes rural economic development. Dr. Leith Deacon's project will receive \$231,554 in Alliance funding.

Legal and Legislated Requirements

The provisions of Municipal Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (MFIPPA) with respect to the collection, use, and disclosure of personal information would apply to the survey if the County will obtain information considered to be personal information through it.

Financial and Resource Implications

The County's contributions for this survey partnership will be \$5,000 which will be funded equally from the existing budgets of Social Services, Economic Development and Planning.

Relevant Consultation

- Internal: Social Services, Children Services, Economic Development, Planning
- External: Leith Deacon, Associate Professor, University of Guelph