Council Direction:

Staff was directed to investigate the cost and staff implications associated with opening City cooling centres at the second stage of the heat trigger system (heat warning) of a 40 degree Celsius humidex, and to provide a report back to the July 9, 2008, Board of Health meeting.

Information:

Report ECS08027(a) provides information about Hamilton’s Community Heat Response Plan for 2008 and provides Council with options to increase response levels beyond those presented in Report ECS08027, on June 18, 2008.

The City of Hamilton, in consultation with our community partners, has developed a Heat Response Plan to help residents protect themselves and support those at-risk of heat-related illness during intense and prolonged hot weather. The plan describes the different types of alerts that can be called by the Medical Officer of Health and is organized around a few central principles:

1. identification of key community partners and participating organizations;
2. use of a standardized warning system activated according to weather conditions;
3. use of communication and public education;
4. implementation of response activities targeting at-risk populations; and,
5. annual plan review.
To date, there has not been a formal review of the effectiveness of municipal heat response procedures. Based on our preliminary scan of various North American cities including Philadelphia, Chicago, Toronto, Windsor and Sarnia, it is clear that no standardized approach exists amongst municipalities when dealing with heat response. Usage of municipally-operated cooling centres varies significantly between the cities reviewed.

- Windsor’s multi-pronged “Beat the Heat” strategy implemented in 2005 included operation of a Cooling Centre at a municipal facility. Windsor Transit redesigned its route to create a stop close to the facility, and free bus tickets were provided to residents who attended the Cooling Centre. After review of their Cooling Centre strategy and experience, and the low attendance at the Cooling Centre, the City of Windsor no longer operates the Cooling Centre and has dedicated resources to work with agencies and others to increase local cooling opportunities across the city.

- The City of Toronto opened five Cooling Centres last year in five community areas. Attendance averaged 356 persons per day attending the centres on the seven days of operation in 2007.

While this disparity in use of cooling centres does not provide clear direction to inform Hamilton’s decision on Cooling Centre operations, there are common elements between the cities. The need to proactively target at-risk residents and provide community leadership in educating residents on preventive measures and coping strategies to reduce potential for heat related illnesses were important elements of the plans reviewed. Heat response plans for all of the cities reviewed include the support of community agencies to assist residents in coping with significant heat events. Despite the various strategies regarding municipally operated Cooling Centres, it is commonly acknowledged that the best defence against an intense heat event is education and prevention, and that most residents prefer to seek cooling options in ways other than attending a municipally run Cooling Centre.

In 2008, Public Health Services, in cooperation with Community Services, expanded its community outreach activity by including additional community partners, agencies and non-governmental organizations. On June 6th, the City issued its first Heat Advisory and subsequent Heat Warning for 2008. Media releases were issued to over 90 RCFs (Residential Care Facilities), 19 identified community partners, various media agencies, as well as over 700 local agencies and non-governmental organizations. Information on mitigation measures and coping strategies were communicated to the public and our community partners.

Coupled with the communication outreach activities, the City is developing a “Check on your Neighbour” Public Service Announcement (PSA) to encourage residents to help each other cope during intense and prolonged heat events. The goal of the PSA is to increase community awareness of heat and heat-related illness and the importance of checking in on those identified at–risk of complications from heat related illnesses. This activity will occur in July, independent of the heat triggers.
In addition to expanding the City’s communication network, Community Services, in cooperation with Public Health and our community partners, is in the process of identifying “cool places” that can be accessed by residents during intense heat events. By offering a “cool place” (i.e. church, private community centres, community agencies, etc.) at the early stages of a heat event, residents will be able to seek relief from the intense heat.

Options for Expanding Hamilton’s Heat Response

On June 18, 2008, Hamilton Council’s Emergency and Community Services Committee directed staff to investigate the cost and staff implications associated with opening City cooling centres at the second stage of the heat trigger system (heat warning) of two consecutive days of 40 degree Celsius humidex. This, as well as other options for extending Hamilton’s Emergency Heat Response, are provided below:

1. **Open City’s Cooling Centres**: Cooling Centre operation costs are estimated at $2,942 per day includes staff costs, bus tickets as well as recovery charges from Good Shepherd (refreshments) and the Canadian Red Cross (cleaning and transportation of cots and blankets, repairs as necessary).

   **Note**: Other operational costs have not been fully assessed; these will include service impacts in Ontario Works and Recreation resulting from staff reassignments.

   Total cost for opening the Cooling Centres at the second stage of the heat trigger system, the Heat Warning stage, will depend on the number of times this weather occurs. There were two days in 2007 when this occurred – and one such day, so far, in 2008.

2. **Extending Outdoor Pool Hours (evenings)**: Total cost for extending outdoor pool hours are estimated at $2,000/day (includes staff and utility costs).

3. **Providing Free Admission to Outdoor Pools**: The City’s outdoor pools provide an opportunity for many residents to cool off during periods of extreme hot weather. If directed, fees could be waived at any stage of the heat trigger system; the revenue impact of waiving fees on any single day (normal operating hours) will be on average $580 per day. (Please note that outdoor pools operate primarily in July and August with limited other usage. Staffing outdoor pools outside of this period would have significant operational issues).

4. **Increased Information Support**: Provide additional information to interested residents via the City’s Customer Contact Centre (546-CITY) on “cool places”, location of outdoor pools, coping strategies. No additional cost.
5. **Free transit**: Providing free transit on heat or smog days is being reviewed by the Public Works Committee in Report PW08082 on July 8, 2008.

6. **Continued Work with Community Partners**: City staff are working with community partners and other identified organizations to increase awareness of heat related illness and coping strategies as well as strengthen the community response during intense hot weather. This work is ongoing.

7. **Check Your Neighbour Campaign**: Creation of a comprehensive “Check Your Neighbour” communication and advertisement campaign to encourage residents to help each other cope during intense and prolonged heat events. The goal of the campaign would be to increase community awareness of heat and heat-related illness and the importance of checking in on those identified at–risk of complications from heat-related illnesses. This activity could include paid media including newspaper advertisements, bus shelter ads and bus advertisements. This activity would occur throughout the summer season and would not be dependent on the heat triggers. Cost estimates based on the Snow Angels campaign suggest that costs could range from $5,000 - $30,000 depending on tactics and frequency.

Keeping residents safe during an intense heat event is a shared responsibility between the City, community partners and our residents. We recognize that our community partners are often “first responders” when speaking to residents about how to take appropriate precautions during intense and prolonged hot weather. The City will continue to work with our community partners at the Advisory, Warning and Alert stage to ensure that the community and those identified at-risk are provided with critical information as well as support during intense heat events.

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Joe-Anne Priel,
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