

Protests gathering momentum

By Jake Storey

Gnomes for Social Justice and Equality, Kerry Leslie and other supporters held a protest outside of Club 580 during Bancroft's council meeting on Tuesday. They were challenging the recent 53 per cent combined rate increase in water and sewer. This is the third protest that Leslie has led concerning this issue.

"I think it [this protest] went better than my last two. I had more people out there with me and I didn't get kicked out this time," said Leslie. "My goal is to show them that this is hurting everybody. We can't afford it. There is just no way we can afford it. Right now I'm \$800 in debt because of this. I have cut back on my water since the increase. When it first came out, my water bill was \$523 and I just got another bill two months later and it's just under \$400."

These sentiments were echoed by other protesters at the event. Protesters held up signs that read, "Roll Back The Rates," and "Don't Hang Us Out To Dry."

"We're hoping to get it lowered. It's time to get back to where people on disability and low-income families can afford to pay their water bills," said protester Barbara Marois.

Leslie referred to the charges as "shocking." She stated that if a price increase were necessary it shouldn't have jumped by any more than 15 per cent.

"My bill used to be \$220 and it went right to \$523? That's too much, people cannot afford that. I'm on disability and a mother of two, there's no way I can do it," said Leslie.

Such a drastic increase would prove difficult for low income families, which according to Dianne Eastman, a member of the gnomes, comprises more than 60 per cent of Bancroft's population.

Eastman argues that this increase to water and sewage is going to affect more than just low-income families. The whole of Bancroft could suffer..

"We're also worried about the effect on businesses. Numerous business people have told us that they cannot afford to pay this," said Eastman.

Much of the blame for this increase has been placed at the feet of the province, as it's mandating the rather expensive construction of a wastewater collection system. Council has stated that there are attempts being made to appeal to the province. "We have to continue to lobby, we have to continue to make our case," said Acting Mayor Paul Jenkins.

Leslie stated that appealing to the province may be a fruitless effort. Eastman said looking for help after the fact wasn't good enough.

"What they don't seem to understand is that they can't just put the rates up now and go to the province some day hoping for relief.

They have to expect that the poorest of the poor cannot manage this increase for however long it takes them to organize this ...

They're telling you that it doesn't matter if you can't afford food to feed your children, or if you have to shut down your business you're still gonna have to pay this bill," said Eastman.

"Everybody has a right to protest," said Jenkins. "It's been done in a respectful and non-disruptive manner. I have personally met with the gnomes several weeks ago and had a long discussion with them. We definitely understand the situation. We don't like it either, with respect to the water and sewage rates. There's a ton of work that's been going on with that, but unfortunately it's not going to come to fruition overnight."