

Are you listening Mr. Bresee?

By Chris Drost

Everywhere you go in North Hastings these days the talk invariably turns to the lack of affordable rental accommodation. The homelessness situation has reached a critical point. Many of those who are working can still not afford the market rents that are beyond their budget. Individual relocating here to start a new job are unable to find accommodation. While at least some may not see it that way, it appears that the Town of Bancroft has been listening. While three new rental buildings are under construction in the downtown that will offer market rents, the 28 planned units above the new library had been anticipated to have 7 affordable (80 per cent of market rate) and the rest at market rate. Recognizing the extreme need for rent-geared-to-income housing in the community, the town has applied for 100 per cent funding through the Rapid Housing Initiative. If successful, this federal program could result in all 28 units at North Hastings Inspiration Place being rent-geared-to-income. The good news is that if approved, the County of Hastings will operate the housing portion of the building, with details still to be worked out. While I personally would have preferred to see a mix of affordable and rent-geared-to-income, I don't see how we can complain. It has been many years since any new RGI housing has been added to our community. At a recent event the opportunity presented itself to ask our MPP, Ric Bresee, about how he thinks the Ford government's decision to allow housing to be built on part of the Greenbelt, will help small communities like Bancroft, have more rent-geared-to-income housing. (This after Premier Doug Ford was caught on video promising his developer friends/donors in 2018 that if elected he would open up a chunk of the Greenbelt for development.) Bresee immediately referred to the Eastern Ontario Warden's Caucus' '7 in 7' housing program. He said that we need to find a way to incentivize the building of small 'purpose-built' housing such as small one-bedroom and three-bedroom apartment rentals. He said that Bill 23 will allow for the waiving of development charges, which will be an incentive to developers. During our discussion, I noted that we already have no development fees in Bancroft and developers are not coming forward to build this type of housing. In response, Bresee explained that his government's budget would be out on March 23 and that they are committed to a new wave of housing strategy each year of their mandate. Bresee also noted that land on the Greenbelt must be built on within three years or it will revert back to the Greenbelt. He added that they are adding an additional 2,000 acres to the Greenbelt, which is more than what will be turned over to housing, but neglected to mention that the Ford government's developer friends will be profiting off of the development, and therefore the inevitable destruction of the irreplaceable ecologically sensitive ecosystems such as provincially significant wetlands, forests, etc. I again questioned how this was going to help the people of Bancroft find affordable housing. It is unlikely any of them would want to or could afford to buy any of the new homes that will be built on previously Greenbelt lands. When pressed whether any financial incentives would be forthcoming for rural areas such as North Hastings, Bresee was non-committal. After our brief discussion, an individual, speaking from the heart, spoke up and asked Bresee for help in addressing the needs of the homeless people in the community who have no place they can afford to live. If Mr. Bresee was okay with giving the reporter a stock answer, that is okay, but I hope he was really listening to the plight of this one individual speaking on behalf of his community. The provincial government needs to take the need for more rent-geared-to-income and transitional housing with support, seriously. That means considering how their programs will serve all parts of Ontario, rural and urban both.