

Bancroft balances budget

By Tony Pearson

Bancroft Town Council will adopt a balanced budget for 2015, which includes new expenditure for fire department equipment and a new furnace at the township office building. To do this, the town will take funds from town financial reserves. In addition, as outlined in last week's paper, Council meeting as Committee of the Whole accepted Treasurer Craig Davidson's proposal for a capital levy? a one per cent tax rate increase, in order to build up new reserves for future capital spending, like road reconstruction, and water and sewer line replacement.

Mention of sewer needs, however, raises the issue of the new elephant in the Council chamber. A couple of months ago, Council discovered that the wastewater operations account was carrying a cumulative deficit of over \$800,000. Figures contained in a draft budget made public two weeks ago showed another \$380,000 being added to this deficit in 2015, even with a 10% increase in sewage charges to system users. This would bring the total deficit to over a million dollars. The wastewater account must be addressed by Council in the next few months.

To pay for new breathing apparatus for fire fighters (\$205,000), the furnace (\$30,000), and new railings at Station Street (\$30,000), over \$250,000 will be transferred from reserve funds.

This transfer, mostly from operating surpluses achieved over the past two fiscal years, will reduce the total amount in all reserves to about \$1.2 million. However, even though the total amount of Bancroft's long-term debt has been reduced significantly (by nearly half a million in 2012/13), it is still expected to total over six and a half million dollars by year's end. As noted, this does not include the million dollar deficit in the sewage account.

Included in the budget are various grants to local organizations, including \$110,000 to the Library, \$25,000 to the museum, and \$15,000 to the Chamber of Commerce. Deputy Mayor Jenkins inquired about additional funding for economic development. However, an increase of \$30,000 in this item is only a transfer of existing salary dollars from town administration, to reflect the time current staff spend on development activity.

The next step is to take the proposed budget to a public hearing before passage.

To somewhat counter the perception that Bancroft's taxes are out of line with surrounding municipalities, the Bancroft Real Estate Board has drafted a flyer which adds to taxes in the area townships the amount which a resident who works in Bancroft would have to spend driving to and from town. Thus it is claimed that a resident of Maynooth who works in Bancroft will spend \$8,500 and 244 hours each year on the commute. This amounts to more than the tax difference between the towns.

To quote from the realtors' flyer: "Spend more time with family and friends and less time in your car. For every kilometre closer to Town you live, you save an estimated \$100 a year in (vehicle costs) ..When the time and cost to commute are factored in, and the benefits of living close to or in the regional hub (Bancroft) are considered, the tax differences become quite marginal." Councillors were quick to add other advantages, like the hospital, schools and recreation facilities, and the airport.

As for attractions, Council was re-visited by representatives of the Rally of the Tall Pines, seeking confirmation of sponsorship and roads arrangements. In response to criticisms such as the lack of Rally activity within Bancroft itself, and the absence of locally-based vendors, Rally organizer Ian Wright suggested the striking of a working group between the Rally and the town council and businesses to see what might be done. He played up the economic benefits to the area, as well as the exposure created for Bancroft on television (TSN) and on social media.

Local business owner Ian Hoeksema continued to voice concerns, and to express doubts about some of the claims made by Rally organizers; they did their best to refute these claims.

Thus, Ross Wood of RallySport Ontario stated that accommodations were always full, and produced e-mails from local hotels in support.

On the other hand, Julie Hoeksema swore that she had called the Best Western and Bancroft Inn on the Saturday and been told rooms were available. Wright stated that an informal survey of Bancroft business had indicated that all but one were positive about the rally, just as there had been only one dissenter along the Rally route.

The Hoeksemas contended that many people had approached them since the fall to express their concerns, particularly about the amount paid by the town in sponsorship fees and in-kind subsidies.

The Rally organizers claimed spectatorship of 4,000; Hoeksema contended that crowds were larger at the Dungannon mud run, where attendance was calculated at only 400.

In the end, Council voted to accept the contract with the Rally, and the attendant sponsorship and in-kind costs (approximately

\$16,000, not counting policing charges). Councillor Bill Kilpatrick cast the only opposing vote (Councillor Barry McGibbon was absent; he was asked by email how he would have voted, but he did not reply). Council later approved an agreement on the use of township roads for the rally.

To further promote Bancroft, the Business Improvement Area outlined plans for downtown beautification, including banners and historic posters. Through the Community Futures Development Corporation, businesses will be encouraged to improve their building fronts and signage through interest-free loans. The BIA is also planning to launch a 'shop locally' campaign this fall.