

Bancroft council continues to search for water

By Tony Pearson

Last week, another possible answer to Bancroft's water and wastewater puzzle turned into a dead end. D. M. Wills Associates of Peterborough delivered their analysis to council, and noted that the average treated water flows over the past three years – the water leaving the treatment plant – was well within the provincial average for town water use.

What that means is that the town's 'missing' water – the 30 to 40 per cent that leaves the plant and never gets billed – may simply be an error in billing procedures. In other words, people are not being charged enough for the water they actually use. Town CAO Hazel Lambe announced that Bancroft will do additional checks of water meter accuracy, and look at the software used to calculate charges. The town will also check the meters at the treatment plant itself.

This issue will carry over to a special council meeting called for Dec. 5, where new rates will be set for water and sewage use. At that meeting, council will also try to decide what route it wants to follow at the end of the current contract with the Ontario Clean Water Agency (OCWA), which now manages the town's water and sewer systems; the current deal ends next year.

Wills identified a number of options for council. The first was negotiating a better contract with OCWA. According to the Wills reps, the current agreement is loaded in OCWA's favour, often to the detriment of the town. For example, their analysis indicates that OCWA has no incentive to reduce flows into the sewer system, since they are paid more for higher volumes.

Also, the base flow into the sewage plant has been consistently underestimated, allowing OCWA to charge extra for most years. Considering that most of what flows into the sewage plant appears to be water infiltrating from outside the system, this is essentially wasted money.

One positive note was sounded by Wills senior consultant Mike Lord. When asked directly if camera inspection could identify where 'outside' water was infiltrating Bancroft's sewers, he stated categorically, 'yes.'

Other options are for the town to take over the operation of the system. However, Wills stated that finding qualified operators is very difficult, and training them takes five years. One other option was forming a regional operations group, where several municipalities would set up a joint management.

However, a more likely scenario was finding an alternate provider – a company other than OCWA. Lord stated that when they had negotiated on behalf of Barry's Bay, there were no competitors. However, he said that there were now at least three.

Council discussed the options, but made no decision. Mayor Bernice Jenkins stated, 'We need to take a breath and think. The situation is too serious for a snap decision.'

In other news, town building officer Dale Shannick advised that he is gathering information on unsafe living conditions in Bancroft, particularly rental units. He contends that needed repairs are not always being carried out by landlords, nor are they always paying utility bills, with some tenants having their hydro cut off as a result. Councillor Bill Kilpatrick suggested that the Community Legal Aid Centre might take up these issues; Councillor Charles Mullett will raise it at the community safety and well-being committee. In a similar vein, since hydro is clearing out trees which have grown too close to power lines, Kilpatrick suggested that this wood might go to the heat bank of wood available for community use. Staff will pursue the issue with hydro.

The Bancroft Business Improvement Area presented their vision for walkways along the York River. Jody Didier and Councillor Mary Kavanagh stated that as a Canada 150 project, the BBIA hopes to create rest and picnic areas along the existing (and incomplete) boardwalk. They would also like to encourage more plants and gardens along the route, as well as murals on Bancroft history. In what they termed Phase Two, the BBIA would like to create a new path along the other (west) side of the river, with more plaques and signage on the natural history of the area. They will invite other community groups to contribute to this beautification effort.

Works manager Perry Kelly announced that everything was proceeding well on the town takeover of recycling, which will begin early in the new year. Lambe stated that interim treasurer Fay Brown expected the town's 2016 to come in as forecast, or possibly with a small surplus (not counting the water and wastewater account deficits). She expects more provincial funding and continued reductions in OPP charges to help with next year's budget.