

Bancroft delegation meets with minister at ROMA

By Nate Smelle

The Town of Bancroft sent a delegation to participate in the 2018 Rural Ontario Municipalities Associations conference in Toronto. The conference was the last chance for the town to connect with the provincial government regarding Bancroft's needs and challenges, prior to the election this June. Bancroft's delegation this year consisted of CAO Hazel Lambe, Mayor Paul Jenkins, Deputy Mayor Charles Mullet and Councillor Mary Kavanagh. Held at the Sheraton Centre Toronto Hotel between Jan. 21 and Jan. 23. The annual three-day conference brings together more than 1,000 elected officials and senior municipal staff from rural municipalities across the province to provide them with an opportunity to network and share information through a series of workshops and meetings.

Jenkins said he sees the conference as an important part of the process of getting the province to respond to the issues affecting the town. He pointed out that it is often through discussing these issues with the ministers' senior staff and parliamentary assistants that they are able to connect with the ministers themselves.

“These are the people who we are going to forward our documents to and then they will study them and brief the minister,” he said. “You've got to convince the staffers in order to get the attention of the ministers. As with everything it's a process, but it will be a fairly tight timeline.”

While at ROMA, Jenkins said the town made requests to meet with three different ministers. The first was the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs to discuss water and wastewater, how much the province is charging the town to rent the public works yard, and the general revenue model. The others were the Ministry of Infrastructure to discuss the upcoming review of the OPP costing model and the Ministry of the Environment and Climate Change to discuss the town's water and wastewater woes. Jenkins said he is hopeful that they will be granted an opportunity to speak directly with each of the ministers sometime in late March. This time frame will allow the town enough time to put the required reports together, he said.

If given the opportunity to meet with the Minister of the Environment and Climate Change Chris Ballard, Jenkins said the town plans to speak with him about its ongoing problems of providing affordable water and wastewater services. Several years ago, Jenkins said a delegation from the town met directly with Glen Murray, minister of the environment at the time, and he acknowledged the province's role in creating Bancroft's wastewater crisis. Unfortunately, Jenkins said, Murray retired from politics six months later to work for the private sector.

The highlight of the conference took place on Monday, Jenkins said, when the Bancroft delegation met with Ontario's Community Safety and Correctional Services Minister Marie-France Lalonde.

Jenkins said they expressed their concerns regarding changes to the certification required for volunteer firefighters being proposed by the province. After listening to their concerns Lalonde indicated that the ministry had yet to make a decision on the matter and that they had no intent to negatively affect fire services in volunteer-serviced areas such as Bancroft, he said. According to Jenkins, the delegation also used the opportunity to discuss the Bancroft OPP and how Bancroft is in a unique position because it serves as a rural/urban hub for surrounding municipalities.

“We feel that the current funding model for rural/urban hubs just doesn't work, because we have all the infrastructure and services that everyone relies on from outside municipalities and our own,” Jenkins said. “It's extensive and as a result our taxes are high, which basically pushes everybody away and stunts development, when we need the revenue here and we need to increase the tax base here.”