

Bancroft doubles sewer rates

By Tony Pearson

In an effort to stop the growth of its sewer deficit, which is threatening Bancroft's financial capacity, the town council has decided to double sewer rates in 2017. In addition, water rates will increase by nearly six per cent. So if you are currently paying \$50 a month for each, next year you will pay \$100 for sewer and \$53 for water.

The decision came after a public meeting last Wednesday at Club 580. It was packed despite the heavy snowfall. Mayor Bernice Jenkins framed council's choice, and the following public debate, by stating that council and staff had been working on the problem of the sewer deficit for two years without discovering why the town was losing water at twice the provincial average, or why 60 per cent of what flows into the sewage treatment plant doesn't seem to come from town users. She said she hoped that camera work on the lines in the spring might provide some answers.

Members of the public had some additional suggestions, such as charging Faraday more to treat their leachate, or even more amalgamation of local municipalities. A number of people were critical of the long period of inaction. There was also criticism of the unfavourable contract Bancroft signed with the Ontario Clear Water Agency (OCWA). Rate payers pointed to the discouraging effect which a large rate increase would have on economic growth, making it more difficult to attract new businesses and residents, especially given existing high municipal taxes.

Another question concerned the effect on overall tax rates, since the consultant recommendation was to transfer \$300,000 from general revenue to the sewer account. Mayor Jenkins replied that in 2017, OPP costs would be \$180,000 lower, and an increase in the provincial grant to the town was going to be in the \$100,000 range.

Again, the contentious issue of selling the Dungannon waste site, valued at about \$5 million came up. The mayor said that this would be debated in January.

One resident questioned what the town would do if someone couldn't pay the higher rates ? whether the town would cut off their water and sewer service.

When Jenkins said that this was possible, the resident countered by asking if the town wanted people relieving themselves in the streets.

When it came time to make a decision, almost all of council reluctantly approved the rate increases and tax transfer. Councillor Mary Kavanagh observed that without action, Bancroft would exceed \$2 million on its line of credit. She also noted that Peterborough residents now pay 50 per cent more for their water than do Bancroft residents.

Councillor Barry McGibbon stated that the rate increase was not ?off the wall,? considering that the installation and maintenance of a well and septic system costs more than paying town water/wastewater charges. He later noted that a lot of the piping is old and will need replacement, so the town needs to build up capital to make repairs. Councillor Charles Mullett agreed that there was no other way around the problem at this stage, although other possibilities might open up in future.

Councillor Bill Kilpatrick was the sole opponent of an immediate steep hike in rates, basing his objection on the impact on low-income families, as well as the damage to Bancroft's potential for expansion. ?We've known about the problem for two years, yet are now told at the 11th hour that we have only one option. History has shown that there are always other ways to attack a problem.?

Afterwards, Jenkins expressed her satisfaction at the turnout, and at the feedback received. ?In the end, we had to take the only feasible option, although it was distasteful. I am glad council had the courage to protect the financial security of our water/wastewater system. But I understand the disappointment and discouragement of ratepayers, although they seem to grudgingly accept our action.? She promised continuing study of the leaks, as well as options for low-income households.

Jenkins stated that the increase only covered 2017, although the consultant's recommendation was that in order to eliminate the deficit, the \$300,000 transfer from the overall budget should continue for another three years. She has delegated Deputy Mayor Paul Jenkins to work as council's finance liaison in the development of next year's financial plans, including the development of the 2017 budget.

At its regular meeting earlier on Tuesday, council floated a trial balloon in asking the province to authorize municipalities to conduct lotteries, as a means of gaining new revenue.

It also learned that the value of new construction in town was higher than last year, although the number of permits was down. In terms of development, council approved a preliminary site plan for the erection of two new buildings in the space beside the Pentecostal Tabernacle near Foodland. One would house the new LCBO outlet.

Finally, some good news arrived from the library, where new CEO Chris Stephenson reported a tripling of program activity and

diversity. He noted that the Library had an outreach service, including home delivery of books for those who can't leave their homes, and new programs for high school students. And in keeping with modernization of libraries, 15 per cent of its circulation is now in the form of eBooks. The next important step was to secure an accessible building.