

Bancroft drafts tax parameters

By Tony Pearson

Bancroft town council's finance and growth committee wrestled last week with a number of conflicting objectives. On the one hand, they want to keep taxes down as much as possible. In particular, they want to reduce the gap between their rates and rates in the adjoining townships of Hastings Highlands and Faraday, currently estimated at 35 to 40 per cent.

On the other hand, they are aware that they don't have the money they should have to make needed repairs to the town's infrastructure ? its roads and pipes and bridges and sewers. According to the asset management study prepared this year by the Public Sector Digest, the town needs to invest about \$4.5 million a year over the next decade and a half for repair and replacement. However, the only money set aside is \$220,000 from gas tax rebates, plus another \$60,000 from the capital levy imposed on ratepayers this year. The Public Sector Digest suggested that it would take 15 years of annual increases of 4.2 per cent in taxes, and annual water and sewer charge increase of 2.1 per cent, to meet the shortfall ? which of course would increase the cost difference with other towns. It might also cause more tax defaults (arrears ? unpaid taxes ? are running around 14 per cent of what's due). Another complication is development. As Deputy mayor Paul Jenkins has repeatedly pointed out, the best way out of the financial bind is to attract more homes and businesses to Bancroft. However, some large stores may want to hook onto town water and sewer. Yet to push water and sewer lines to the north, where the largest plots of land lie, would cost a large amount of money.

Borrowing isn't much of an option either. Treasurer Craig Davidson reported that Bancroft now uses 7.6 per cent of its operating revenue to service current debt. This is well above the level of five per cent recommended by the province. But paying down the town debt would also cost significant money. Talk about a rock and a hard place.

There is a bit of light, however, at the end of this expensive tunnel: OPP policing charges will keep coming down over the next few years. Another saving is coming with the installation of more efficient town lights. But these savings are a long way from solving all the competing needs.

The finance committee decided to recommend to Council: (1) that in budget planning, the maximum tax rate increase be held to two per cent; (2) that the town not take out new loans until the service charges fall below five per cent (unless the project will end up saving more than it costs, like the LED lighting); (3) that long term, the town work to reduce the tax rate differential between itself and Hastings Highlands and Faraday to 15 to 17 per cent (except where this might reduce provincial grants); (4) that any surpluses in town accounts, plus any reductions in policing expenses, be sent to Bancroft's capital reserves.

Chief administrative officer Hazel Lambe summed up the objective of town staff as helping to meet sustainable asset management upgrades through careful financial analysis, identification of the highest risk/reward options, looking for more efficiencies, and seeking new funding from the provincial and federal governments.

Next step on this road: initial drafting of the town budget, starting next month.

In other town business, a meeting of full council on Tuesday added Bancroft's name to the growing list of municipalities objecting to the sale of Hydro One.

As well, they approved a new contract for curbside recycling with Progressive Waste Solutions, which will see a five per cent increase in their monthly charge for the service.

Council also affirmed its support for the York River boardwalk project in its desire for further development, provided that any future expansion respects private landowner rights.

In what seems more of a spat than a substantive issue, Bancroft backed out of an understanding with neighbouring townships (Faraday, Tudor-Cashel, Limerick) to have their building officers cover for each other in vacation periods. Bancroft asked that Dale Shannick's travel costs be reimbursed; the other townships expressed sympathy, but said "no dice." So Bancroft is cancelling its involvement in the arrangement.

Bancroft also had difficulty getting across its points about the county's official plan. The county's planning department only recommended changes where more than one municipality expressed a concern, leaving many of Bancroft's views high and dry. The town will write the province directly.

Following complaints from the Deep River investigative team about the knowledge and level of service of town office staff, the town is conducting a customer satisfaction survey to strengthen this area.

Bancroft is also looking for a new animal control officer; they are talking to Hastings Animal Rescue Team (HART) about how to cope in the interim.

Finally, council looked at requirements for a code of conduct for councillors. CAO Lambe reported that following new provincial

legislation, an official complaint protocol is needed, as well as an outline of the consequences of failure to abide by the code. Council also agreed to use the provincial Ombudsman as their integrity commissioner, rather than a lawyer ? at least for the time being. The use of the Ombudsman will not result in a fee to the township.