

Bancroft hears from its wastewater managers

By Tony Pearson

Bancroft council finally heard from the managers of their water and wastewater systems at last week's council. The representatives, Andy Trader and Ashley Pilgrim, gave a thorough run-down of all the services which the Ontario Clean Water Agency (OCWA) provides to Bancroft, from maintenance and repair to environmental review. And the quality of their work was saluted by several members of council.

But the work itself wasn't the council's concern with OCWA. With a continuing annual sewer deficit of over \$400,000, and with the water account slipping into shortfall, cost was the council's number one priority. The OCWA representative trader focused on the rising cost of hydro, which doubled since 2015, and asserted that OCWA had reduced its central overhead by 25 per cent over the past few years. He also blamed increased government regulation, and suggested some ways in which additional savings could be achieved.

In reply, Councillor Bill Kilpatrick observed that Bancroft is paying more than the provincial average for water and wastewater service, and noted that the maximum possible savings suggested by OCWA is only a quarter of the annual sewer deficit. But after the presentation, when asked about the town running out of money next year because of wastewater charges, OCWA rep Ashley Pilgrim simply replied, "The cost is the cost."

Deputy Mayor Paul Jenkins followed up the presentation by convening a further meeting this week of councillors and town staff with OCWA to look at the issue of volumes and flows. As it stands, only 40 per cent of the water leaving the treatment plant is being billed to Bancroft homes and businesses. Conversely, only 40 per cent of the wastewater going into the sewage treatment plant comes from Bancroft sewer users.

So a lot of water seems to be disappearing before it gets to those hooked up to the water line, and a lot of what the sewage plant is dealing with doesn't seem to be town sewage. Failing a resolution to these disappearing and reappearing flows, very large rate hikes seem inevitable.

With the current OCWA contract about to expire, Jenkins asked if there was enough time for the town to set up its own water/wastewater management system. CAO Hazel Lambe said that there was enough time.

Council also learned that its water and wastewater facilities are in reasonable condition, with only valves and catch basins carrying a "high" risk. However, replacing them would cost about \$2 million.

In other financial business, council approved an interim fix for the town office furnace, which now seems to be on its last legs. Instead of getting a repair, the town will spend \$20,000 on a small propane furnace, supplemented by space heaters if necessary (space heaters are now in use for the times when the oil furnace has to be shut down). In the longer term, additional measures will be necessary, like additional insulation, and another propane unit.

A potential new initiative to improve food security in Bancroft was rejected by a strong majority of council. Kilpatrick feels that with the growing emphasis on healthy and locally grown food, as well as the need for low income families to save on their food budgets, Bancroft should look into what is termed "urban agriculture" - growing food, including meat and fish, within towns and cities. (Raising animals is permitted now in the rural areas of Dungannon, but not in its "built-up" areas, or anywhere in Bancroft) "Studies show that gardening and raising livestock is therapeutic," Kilpatrick claimed. "The more price increases continue to outpace wages, the less people will be eating well and the more strain that will be placed on our health-care system, and the more people will turn to other sources of revenue, often illegal, to make up for the wage gap, thus adding more strain and cost to the OPP budget as well."

He therefore proposed that town staff do some research on how other municipalities in Ontario are handling urban agriculture. Given the heavy current load on staff, he asked CAO Lambe if mid-April was a reasonable time frame; she agreed. However, Fitzpatrick was supported only by Deputy Mayor Jenkins.

None of the councillors who opposed the motion gave any reasons for their opposition at the time. When the two Bancroft reps who voted against (Councillors Mary Kavanagh and Tracy McGibbon) were asked later for a comment, they both declined. Councillor Charles Mullett stated that within Bancroft, people wouldn't want animals in close proximity, and town staff didn't have the time for a study.

In other matters, the town learned from works manager Perry Kelly that the Snow Road water main is on schedule and expects to be under budget. And in youth recreation, a new girls' rugby team is starting this summer.