

Bancroft joins appeal of chains? reassessments

By Tony Pearson

Canadian Tire and other national chains are mounting campaigns across Canada to reduce the amount of money they pay to local governments. In Ontario, Canadian Tire is appealing municipal assessments on more than 100 of its stores, including the one in Bancroft. Other chains represented in Bancroft are also appealing on a provincial basis.

The implications are serious for local property owners. Any reductions in local revenue from large businesses means that residential property owners will have to pay what the big companies don't, or face reductions in services.

In Espanola in northern Ontario, Domtar convinced the provincial assessment review board to cut the assessment on its mill by more than 75 per cent. As a result, the town had to refund the company \$5.2 million for taxes collected over a period of years on the original MPAC assessment.

To deal with the crisis, Espanola had to increase homeowners' taxes, reduce its operating budget by over a million dollars, lay off more than 10 per cent of its staff, indefinitely put off road work, water and sewer improvements, and scrap plans for a new fire hall. Bancroft town council will join with other small municipalities who are engaging legal help to plead their case at the provincial appeals body, the members of the finance and growth committee decided at their Dec. 3 meeting.

Bancroft will kick in \$1,500 as its share. As treasurer Craig Davidson pointed out, the financial implications are significant: "A drastic reduction in [business] assessment would affect property taxation throughout the town."

Mayor Bernice Jenkins added: "This could be just the start of major revenue loss. We have to take a stand."

Bancroft will also seek support from the county, and from the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO).

Asked why it is trying to reduce its assessments, a Canadian Tire spokesperson stated: "Through the normal course of business, it's important for us to prudently manage our business expenses, including ensuring our realty assessments and ensuing taxation liability are fair and equitable? It's simply an indication of prudent management of our expenses."

The finance and growth committee also decided to recommend a new schedule of fees for administrative services to Bancroft council. Many fees will stay the same - like \$400 for a minor variance - but many are going up. For example, it will now cost \$50 more to get married, and a burial certificate is going from \$5 to \$10. Deputy Mayor Paul Jenkins was surprised to note that Bancroft requires dogs to have a tag, the price of which is going from \$10 a dog to \$20 if paid in the first three months of the year, and \$40 if paid later.

Councillors sent in their "wish lists" for new projects in 2016. These include a furnace at the municipal office building; an upgrade to the public washrooms at Millennium and Riverside parks; more township signage, especially in Dungannon; and additional town staff to coordinate committees, pursue grants, and supervise public works projects. The mayor noted the public perception that the town was overstaffed already - something she stated was definitely not the case. Councillor Mary Kavanagh said that in fact, extra staff could save the town money in the long run. Councillors Paul Jenkins and Bill Kilpatrick asked the CAO to take a look at how other similar-sized towns met their admin and reporting needs - for example, whether they used permanent staff or short-term contracts.

Council is getting help with one of its major financial problems, namely water and sewer costs. The call for assistance from the public paid off with a number of volunteers with expertise in engineering and water plant management agreeing to help. This group also met on Thursday and identified areas and methods for investigation; these will be followed up in the near future.

Meanwhile, consideration of the 2016 budget was put off until more input from the town's operations departments comes in.

Davidson again predicted that the town will have a small (\$50,000) surplus for 2015, as well as another large deficit (\$420,000) on its sewer account.