

Bancroft Mayor discusses homelessness crisis amid pandemic

By Nate Smelle

Last week The Bancroft Times spoke with Victoria Burke and Shannon O'Keefe about their experiences of working with the North Hastings Community Trust on the front-lines of the homelessness crisis during the COVID-19 pandemic. To gain further insight into the coming together of these crises and how they are affecting the community, this week The Bancroft Times discussed the matter with Bancroft's Mayor Paul Jenkins. According to Jenkins, he recently addressed the local homelessness crisis in a letter to the Trust, written on behalf of council. Stressing the complexity of the issues involved, council described in the letter how "homelessness and addiction are complex social problems with a variety of underlying economic and social factors such as poverty, lack of affordable housing, uncertain physical and mental health, and community and family breakdown."

Homelessness is not just a "Bancroft problem," it is a "provincial and national crisis," explained Jenkins. Unfortunately for those who are currently homeless in North Hastings, he said the town does not receive funding to provide social services. Although as the hub of North Hastings, Bancroft provides services to residents and visitors from all neighbouring municipalities, Jenkins said there are not any funds or resources available to deal with the crisis on the municipal level. The first step in finding a solution locally, he said, is for the province and the feds to make homelessness a top priority.

"This is not something that we can solve at the local level," said Jenkins. "I am not trying to pass the buck here, but the way that the system is set up, is that we operate under a two-tier system. We are not funded for any social services. We are not funded for any of this stuff. We are a town of 3,900 people, with a very small assessment base, but, because we are a hub community everybody gravitates to here. So we need much bigger help in solving any issue."

He continued "We would more than love to take care of the situation, but we do not have any resources. And all these people don't just come from Bancroft, they come from other municipalities outside our area too. So, this is a regional problem as well. We can't be tasked just because we are the hub."

Council informed the Trust in the letter that any discussions regarding homelessness must now involve Hastings County, because they are the social service providers. Recognizing similarities between the reason why the municipality cannot afford to help the homeless; and why the town cannot afford to lower its wastewater rates, Jenkins added "This is no different than the water issue where we basically got screwed on our sewage treatment plant, and the whole model that was developed behind that. Go to the people who are in charge of this and have the money. Believe me, I am there lobbying all the time and we are committed to continuing to do that. But, we are not the gatekeeper, and we are not the end result, so it has to come from up above."

Adding to the complexity of the search for a solution to this crisis, Jenkins said, is the fact that there are several "sub-sectors" of the homeless population. Without a one-size-fits-all solution available for all of these sub-sectors, he said they are actually trying to find individual long-term solutions to the unique personal struggles and circumstances faced by people from each faction.

"People are homeless for various reasons," Jenkins said. "There are people who because of the pandemic have lost their jobs. There's people that are homeless, or on the verge of homelessness that are the working poor. Then we have the homeless sector due to drug and mental health issues. We can't solve all those as one, because they almost become combating forces? I think we really have to sit down and break this down and really analyze it sector-by-sector. Some people just don't want long-term help. I don't know what we can do for those people, but I sure as hell would like to help the people who want help, who are willing to make an effort. Because I don't think there is anybody who does not want to see the situation taken care of."

In order to provide a short-term solution for members of the homeless community the Trust had requested that the Town of Bancroft provide access to land where people without a home could camp while not having to worry about losing their possessions or getting evicted by the police. To transform a quick fix into a long-term solution, both Burke and O'Keefe also suggested that the land could be used to build a tiny home village where people who are homeless could live year-round.

Reiterating what he said council had already told the Trust in the letter, Jenkins said the municipality did not have any land available for such a project. However, he said even if the municipality did have land to offer up council would not support the idea of establishing a tent city. "Find me a city anywhere where a tent city has worked. They don't work," declared Jenkins. "If we were down in the southern states you could possibly stay in one year-round, but come November here, boy it turns bad. So it is not a sustainable solution. We need something that is sustainable or else we just keep revisiting this over and over."

While Jenkins likes the concept of a tiny home village, he said there are several hurdles standing in the way of making such a development a reality. "The concept is great, but you're going to have to get planning approvals and you are going to have to have the money to do it," said Jenkins. "Anything that you go to do with a sustainable solution has got a longer window to get going."

With winter fast approaching, Jenkins said he realizes the urgency of dealing with the homelessness crisis. However, considering it would be impossible to receive the necessary approval and complete the construction before the snow flies, he recommends anyone confronted with homelessness to take advantage of the county's offer to transport homeless people from North Hastings to Belleville where they can access social services.

Indicating that he understands shipping people from Bancroft to Belleville is not an ideal solution, Jenkins said it is currently the only option available for local homeless people to find shelter and access services until a long-term strategy is developed and implemented. When such a solution could be expected, he said he could not say.

Due to the economic impact of the pandemic and its existing threat to public health, Jenkins is concerned that the situation with homelessness in North Hastings will get worse before it gets better. Explaining the basis of his concerns, he said "The provincial government came out this week with their deficit numbers [\$38.5 billion projected in 2020], and the cost of COVID-19 is going to cripple some upper levels of government. So, where is the money going to come from? I don't know, and I am very concerned about that."

Moving forward, Jenkins said the Trust, municipalities and all agencies working on a solution to homelessness need to learn from initiatives that have failed in the past. Providing two examples highlighted in the letter, Jenkins pointed out how the warming centre at St. Paul's United Church had to be shut down last winter; and how the rooms at the Sword Inn previously made available to people in need of shelter were terminated. Although everyone involved with these initiatives may have had good intentions, he said the fact is that they failed.

"If it didn't work twice we cannot go that route again," Jenkins said. "What that route is I really don't know, and it's on the top of my priority list to work on this. But, we need to pull in the 'uppers' [upper levels of government] on this, there is no question."