

Bancroft reports \$207,350 arena deficit in 2023

By Kaitlin Sylvester

The North Hastings Community Centre stands alone as the only recreational infrastructure in North Hastings. Ongoing financial challenges have left the arena in dire circumstances which led the Bancroft council to take over operations in 2022. In the March 27 special council meeting council reviewed the operating budget and revenue of the past fiscal year to begin discussions on the future funding of the arena. The NHCC, inaugurated in 1972, underwent a significant operational shift when it transitioned from Arena Commission governance to the Town of Bancroft. This transition was necessitated after a prolonged struggle with financial sustainability and compounded by accumulating deficits and an inability to address critical maintenance issues. Andra Kauffeldt, general manager of the town said "there was no long-term capital plan and that really came to a head with the roof" at the time when the roof really needed to be repaired there were four members on the commission and a request went to each of the member municipalities to provide \$10,000 toward that repair. Some of the communities agreed while some did not and ultimately the commission was left with a bit of a conundrum. "Despite efforts to seek financial assistance from neighbouring municipalities, Bancroft inherited a challenging financial landscape, marred by deficits and deferred maintenance, necessitating a strategic approach to ensure the NHCC's viability. The current operational costs of the NHCC paint a stark picture of continued financial strain. The unaudited expenses for 2023 amounted to \$438,231, while revenues stood at \$230,881, resulting in an operational deficit of \$207,350. Paul Jenkins, mayor of Bancroft admitted it "was kind of a nice surprise that we had more revenue than we expected." Efforts to engage surrounding municipalities in collaborative operational models have yielded mixed results, with Carlow-Mayo Township pitching in \$3,000, while Hastings Highlands and Faraday Township initially declined. Hastings Highlands did offer \$6,000 to the fund but the funds were ultimately declined last year with Bancroft council saying it was too little to cover the operational costs. User fees were then implemented in 2023 for residents from Hastings Highlands and Faraday to help generate some income but based on the numbers presented at the special council meetings there is still a significant gap to fill. The prospect of NHCC's closure has caused profound concern and advocacy from Bancroft residents, elucidating the facility's integral role in community life. In the Feb. 6 edition of Bancroft This Week it was reported that arena stakeholders, residents, elected officials, and local businesses, have all decried the adverse impact on Bancroft's overall appeal as a family-friendly locale if the arena were to close. In February, Chris Saylor, president of the Skating Club told Bancroft This Week "when I was a teenager . . . there were five to six concerts a summer, dances, and even a wrestling match to raise funds for the arena." Other community members have reminisced about the NHCC's history and continued role as a cultural and recreational hub in the region. Advocates for the arena emphasise the need for sustained investment in youth programs, recreational amenities, and community infrastructure to nurture the region's social fabric and foster intergenerational cohesion. During the arena audit, council members also looked at the breakdown of users, reviewing where existing users of the arena's services were primarily located. Kauffeldt noted that "we do not have the name and address of every user to prove exactly where they live . . . some teams provided us with their own summary [and] some of the bigger leagues . . . are not allowed to release that information." Nonetheless, during the regional review Kauffeldt showed that 38 per cent of arena users were from Hastings Highlands, 31 per cent from Bancroft, 10 per cent from Faraday and the remaining 30 per cent from other smaller townships. Council members struggled to understand why Bancroft was shouldering the financial burden of a service used widely by neighbouring communities. "I don't see why the town of Bancroft should eat an extra \$100,000," said Councillor Wayne Wiggins. The Town of Bancroft did receive a grant in order to complete an arena assessment to help council understand long-term maintenance costs and ultimately enhance their asset management plan. Completed in late 2023, Bancroft council is currently finalising the report. The council has made it clear that they wish for the NHCC to remain open and confirmed there is no desire or plan to close it at this time. Jenkins noted during the council meeting, "we really want to work with our neighbours and have them recognize that this is regional facility. It is the North Hastings Community Centre not the Bancroft arena." As Bancroft navigates the fiscal challenges, a collaborative, forward-thinking approach is needed. While the town is committed to engaging neighbouring municipalities and prioritising asset management, more work is needed to decrease the existing deficit and ensure the day to day operations can be maintained while planning for the future of the space. Exploring revenue diversification strategies, harnessing community engagement, fostering partnerships, and leveraging available resources, can all help to chart a sustainable path forward.