

Bancroft to increase sewer rates while continuing investigation

By Tony Pearson

Looking at a growing deficit in its sewer account, Bancroft town council agreed last week to an immediate two percent increase in sewer rates, followed by another two percent increase in January. This mirrors the recent raise in water rates. However, it is only a temporary measure, while the town continues to investigate the central mystery ? namely, why the amount of sewage going into the treatment plant is more than double the amount which sewer users appear to be using.

Various causes have been suggested, from leaks in storm sewers to a high water table in the area of the plant, but as yet, there is no proven cause for the mismatch between what users put out and what the treatment plant takes in. If the total volume treated were billed for, the account would be in balance. However, it is actually running an annual shortfall of over \$400,000. Councillors discussed various studies which might be done, including sending cameras through sewer lines and storm sewer drains. They also asked about metering sewer outflow from homes and businesses, but this could prove too expensive for what could be discovered. On a more positive note, Council was pleased at progress on the Emerald Hill housing project proposal, which would see an apartment building and three ?four-plex? houses on the site of the former Bancroft Public School. The proposal has already been modified, in that the four barrier-free units original suggested for physically impaired seniors are no longer in the plans. However, two new ?guest units will be added to the 18 permanent apartments. Also, there are plans to convert some of the development from rental units to condominiums in future.

Concerns were also raised about traffic, and about the absence of a common area for the apartments, as well as the extent of greenspace at the development. Heather Sadler of Eco Vue Consulting, on behalf of the owners, noted that with the increased revenue the complex will bring Bancroft, the town could then afford improvements. Although a number of local residents attended the meeting, none voiced any objection to the development. Sadler observed that Emerald Hills would also bring more vibrancy to Bancroft. In the end, Council voted unanimously for the necessary re-zoning.

In other development initiatives, Council will signal the province of its interest in grants programs to improve the water treatment plant, and to conduct an engineering study (estimated at \$750,000) for the proposed northern sewer extension. Such a study should also clarify the total cost of the sewer extension, currently estimated at \$4.5 million.

In regard to capital planning, CAO Hazel Lambe pointed out that the recently received Asset Management Plan allows the town to plan carefully: ?It shows a path to the future and the need to make well informed decisions to get to where a healthy municipality needs to be. If you are fully aware of your needs, half the battle is won. Detailed asset management plans provide the facts to enable a municipality to move forward in a responsible manner; they identify what it will take for municipalities to meet their challenges.? In this connection, a Hasting County study showed that infrastructure replacement needs are not unique to Bancroft. The town's estimated capital financial need of \$3.2 million over the next 25 years is exceeded by Tweed (\$3.5 M), Hastings Highlands (\$4 M), Centre Hastings (\$4.5 M), and the County itself (\$10.5 M). In further financial matters, Bancroft Council approved the closure of cell one at the Faraday Landfill. Since it turned out that the low tender is nearly double the original estimate, staff will have to find an extra \$52,800 in next year's budget for this work.

Council will also need a bit more money to ensure that the new York River boardwalk is safe, by providing strong railings. Although these are not legally required, the town's liability in the event of an accident was seen as worrisome enough to warrant the spending. The funds are available in the current Parkland reserve fund. On other financial matters, Council approved the issue of a one million dollar debenture, to ?clean up? previous unfunded liabilities. As this simply shifts the amount from one line item to another, the town's long-term indebtedness remains as given in the current budget: a total of about \$6.6 million. With the shift from sporadic line-of-credit charges, repayment and interest costs will rise by about \$100,000 in the current year, to around \$700,000. Turning to area development concerns, Council heard from Cindy Cassidy, general manager of the Eastern Ontario Trails Alliance. She reviewed the progress made since the EOTA's formation in 1998, to the point where the EOTA's hundreds of kilometres of trails are used by more than 25,000 visitors a year, who spend \$6 million on their travels in all four seasons ? hiking, cycling, horseback riding, ATV'ing, snowmobiling, skiing, and snowshoeing. She also showed how the Alliance promotes trail use through promotion (brochures, maps, website, trade shows), packaging (trail guides, tours, business partner tie-ins), and signage.

In discussion with councillor Barry McGibbon, who contended that local users feel that their trails are not serviced as well as in the southern portion of the region, she noted that trail conditions in the area are checked monthly and maintenance contractors promptly contacted about problems. She will talk further with Bancroft Works Manager Perry Kelly. She also promised that EOTA would work with a new ATV club, if one were established.

Councillor Mary Kavanagh, liaison to the Bancroft Business Improvement Area, reported that the BBIA is not able to organize the 2016 Wheels Water Wings event on the current volunteer basis. Former BIA head Jody Didier has been given a \$3,000 contract for the month of September to do planning and communications; this position will be reviewed at the next meeting, and may be extended. The BIA hopes to start a monthly newsletter.