

Bancroft's mayor reflects on the state of the municipality



By Tony Pearson

Just like all municipalities today, the township of Bancroft is facing a number of challenges, according to Mayor Bernice Jenkins. Many of these challenges are financial. Nonetheless, she feels the financial picture has improved from a few years ago. As well, she says there are many signs of encouragement, particularly in inter-governmental relations, which may aid Bancroft's treasury.

One such improvement was in policing charges from the OPP. Although the town feels the phase-in to the new fee structure is stretched out over a very extended period, charges will be declining for the next five years. "So even if the tunnel is way too long," she says, "at least we can now see the light at the end." The mayor is also looking forward to a management plan for the town's financial assets, due this month, to help guide the fiscal path ahead.

In terms of overall town health, Jenkins observes that Bancroft's population is stable, while property values have increased, albeit only by a small amount. Although she would prefer to see growth, Jenkins notes that many other rural townships are losing people and assessment. Therefore she hopes to see major infrastructure improvements, which could act as a spur to economic development, and to improving the municipal financial picture. Chief among these is the northern extension of the sewer line; Jenkins hopes that grants from the provincial and federal levels of government can cover the great majority of the costs, with the new customers providing the remaining revenue needed.

As for other improvements, the mayor noted the coming conversion of street lighting, where the LED system is expected to produce major savings. In addition, she mentioned a new program to allow residents on town water to insure their home lines against damage. On the other hand, given the ongoing town deficit in this area, a significant rise in sewage charges seems to be on the

horizon.

As for capital works, the town expects to finish work on Quarry Road. But whether other road work and capital projects can be undertaken depends on the budget, Jenkins says; the figures will tell council whether funds are available for any new projects.

Moving from funding to fun, Jenkins says that coming up, Bancroft residents and visitors will enjoy a bigger and better Wheels, Water & Wings festival in July. In addition, Canada Day celebrations are expanding, with the restoration of evening fireworks. The township is bringing the popular Smash Wrestling troupe to town over the Victoria weekend. The month of May also sees the popular annual Dungannon Mud Run, which not only delights the crowd but allows the fire department to purchase new safety equipment. And of course, Gemboree, Canada's largest gem and mineral show, is back on the August long weekend. Looking further ahead, Jenkins said that Saw-Tech, a forestry trade show, may return to Bancroft in 2016.

To put more colour into the downtown area, the township is working with the Business Improvement Association to put up new banners which show Bancroft's heritage; downtown merchants will also have heritage posters in their own stores. She would like the local museum to expand its programming and hours, but acknowledged that since its budget comes from the town, this would be difficult.

Asked about what Bancroft council hopes to achieve in the coming year, Jenkins observed that with a majority of first-term members, council was still 'finding its feet'. She hopes that an upcoming five-year financial planning model will allow for longer-term budget planning, with more year-to-year stability.

Asked about the personal challenges and rewards of the mayor's position, Jenkins spoke about Bancroft's ability to influence change. She felt that Bancroft had taken the lead on many municipal-provincial issues, like policing charges, community safety programs, and funding the upkeep of 'connecting links' (provincial highways running through town). She was confident that Bancroft's voice was being heard at Queen's Park, and hoped this would continue.

Again looking further into the future, Jenkins looked to the Ontario premier's words about developing 'community service hubs' as a positive indication that improvement was coming to health and social services. She stated that Bancroft has advocated this to the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing several times, and wanted the chance to put some models into operation. This would allow service clients to gain so-called 'one-stop shopping' - one application to gain access to all needed programs, rather than having to deal with multiple bureaucracies and reams of duplicative paperwork. 'It would be nice to think that the 'people services' of governments, including those for seniors, will finally become user-friendly,' Jenkins stated. 'We try to provide integrated service at the township level, but with so many agencies at so many levels of government, there's a definite limit to what a municipality can do to smooth the path for clients.'

All in all, Jenkins says that she continues to enjoy her job, and the day-to-day contact it brings with people in all walks of life.