

Boardwalk to nowhere

Recently, the Town of Bancroft decided to take over recycling. Although the finances were initially somewhat confusing, a concrete plan was developed, and proper cost comparisons eventually made, so the town can now confidently take the outlined measures required.

Last week, on a closely divided vote, a majority of Bancroft council decided to assume full responsibility for the boardwalk along the York River. However, in this case, the decision was made without much consideration of consequences or future action. The boardwalk has so far been built by the time and labour of a volunteer community group, who raised all the money (\$220,000) which the project has cost to date. The town played no part in the funding or construction. But now, four councillors have agreed that this group should now be politely but firmly dismissed, and that from now on, any and all aspects of work, planning, and construction must be presented to Town of Bancroft Council for approval.

The volunteer leaders call it a slap in the face? and a bitter experience.? The councillors contend that the project had stalled, and they need to run things themselves from now on.

I asked Councillor Mary Kavanagh, who moved the take-over motion, if she and her colleagues had a plan for completing the boardwalk. She expressed the hope that different community groups would come forward with plans. She expects to see proposals in a couple of months, although she does not know of any specific group who definitely will do so.

One thing is certain; the project is definitely stalled. Two of the land-owners along the boardwalk's route are withholding permission for it to cross their land. Councillor Bill Kilpatrick had proposed that the town send a letter asking them for the reasons for their objections, to see if any could be overcome. The majority group rejected this proposal, feeling it would constitute bullying? of the land-owners. Kilpatrick then suggested that a steering committee made up of members of council, the volunteer boardwalk group, and the trails committee be struck to come up with alternate plans. This too was rejected by a majority of council.

The volunteer boardwalk committee did have two alternate plans to recommend. One would have taken the boardwalk out over the river where they couldn't use the land. This too was felt to interfere with the objecting property owners' rights. Another suggestion was to bring the boardwalk up to and along Hastings Street to cover the gap. This also fell by the wayside.

So a group of four councillors has asserted its eminent domain over the project. They have done so without plans. There are no plans to complete it, no plans to fund further work, no plans to beautify it and make it a downtown attraction in its own right ? the idea of the original volunteer group.

Moreover, the way the organizing group ? the builders ? have been shown the door, does not seem a great way to attract new groups to get involved.

Since the councillors supporting the take-over do not appear to want any town money or town staff time devoted to the boardwalk project, and since they do not want to advocate for it with the property owners blocking its completion, then it seems logical to think that the project has come to an end. We may have a walk-way to nowhere, gradually falling into disuse and disrepair, until it has to be torn up for scrap. Those who gave their own money to make it happen will see their community investment vanish.

You can make the argument, as Tom and Mary Robinson did in a letter a few weeks ago, that the boardwalk project was ill-conceived in the first place ? that it will do nothing for downtown revitalization. You can claim, as one councillor has, that the volunteer builders should never have gone ahead without every property owner on board.

But the town did let the project go ahead. They supported it when the group applied for Trillium funding. Councillors showed up at its dedication.

So there must be follow-through. Council must see that an effort is made to get stakeholders together in a serious discussion of ways to finish what's been started and nearly finished. Now is not the time for premature withdrawal.

If a majority of town councillors want 'sole responsibility' for the boardwalk, then they must accept responsibility for bringing the project to a successful conclusion, and they must put in the work to make that happen, just as the volunteer group of builders put in the work to bring it this far.