

Calling for a new vision

To the Editor,

At the annual Hastings Highlands budget meeting on Wednesday evening many people touched on the challenges faced by our municipality in 2017 and beyond. We face declining provincial funding because of our status as a small rural community, and we have unpredictable operating costs complicated by climate change. This situation is unlikely to improve. Although our municipal staff and council are doing a good job with the present budget, there is a lack of inspiring vision for the future. This is understandable. But what I heard from people's questions in the budget meeting was that we need more from our municipal government than a balanced budget and cleared roads. We need strategic vision and planning for how we will face an uncertain future.

In Manitoba and Prince Edward Island, provincial governments have been clear with municipalities that the reason for shifting access to provincial infrastructure and other grants to communities of \$100,000, was to incentivize further amalgamations (or ?broadening the tax base?) with the goal of making communities more financially sustainable. The unspoken assumption is that smaller communities are not financially solvent if abandoned by provincial funding.

The Harris government created the Panel on the Role of Government, which continued under the Eves and McGuinty governments. Their 2005 report was published under the McGuinty government, and made numerous suggestions to create more financially ?sustainable? communities. Their five and 10 year plans were veiled attempts at solving the financial problem of small rural communities by downloading assets and liabilities to the municipal level, forcing small rural communities to pay the true costs of services, and letting this strategic economic policy determine the viability of rural communities. However, unlike Manitoba and Prince Edward Island, the Ontario government did not make it clear to municipalities that it was testing the mettle of small rural communities, pushing them towards funding crises that would force further amalgamations or precipitate a rapid decline. Rural areas cannot be asked to become financially ?sustainable? disproportionate to other kinds of communities. Rural areas are under-valued in terms of ecosystem services, natural capital, culture and history, and as part of a diversified national economy. The math being used at the provincial level to make decisions about funding and sustainability do not take these indirect benefits into account. The same faulty traditional economic equations which ignore the value of anything but labour and money are responsible for the current lack of funding small rural municipalities are facing.

Our municipality would be well served by a clear acknowledgment that these are unprecedented times in Ontario, Canada, and the world, and that we can no longer rely on the old funding structures which ensured our survival in the past. We need to take responsibility as a municipality for our own future. We need to create a vision to guide our decisions and our strategic planning. Resilience is up to us. We have to make it work.

On the bright side, we are not alone. All small, rural communities in Ontario face similar challenges. But if we fail to meet the new economic and policy realities of 2017 and beyond, we cannot adapt the way we need to. Amalgamations are not the only answer to rural sustainability. We cannot let the provincial and federal governments off the hook, and we must advocate for fair treatment and the same sharing of costs that other types of Canadian communities enjoy. But while we stand up for ourselves, we must also stand together and look at our communities as places of immense possibility. There has never been a time like what we are facing today as a small rural community, a country, and a planet.

I would like to see my municipal council bring the community together to create a strategic vision for Hastings Highlands. This vision would inform decision making, and would be the beginning of innovative strategic planning in these uncertain times. Many of the concerns from the Hastings Highlands residents about how to create growth, and how to become more financially sustainable, can only be addressed by taking this step forward. If we do not take it upon ourselves to become resilient, we will continue to be marginalized by the old mathematics which got us to where we find ourselves now. Hastings Highlands is already doing a good job, and we have a great team of staff and council. We are well positioned to come together as a community and now is the time to do it.

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