

CAO Dorey addresses homelessness and affordable housing crisis in Hastings County



By Bill Kilpatrick

Connor Dorey, who is now going into his third month as the new Chief Executive Officer for Hastings County, spoke to Bancroft This Week about housing, homelessness, and plans that the county has for a warming centre this winter. Dorey said that the county is aware of the meeting planned for Sept. 26 at the Bancroft Village Playhouse to discuss homelessness and that the county will have representatives there. Dorey discussed some of the difficulties faced by, not only Hastings County, but municipalities as well. He spoke about how complex the issue of homelessness is and why, because of the complexity of the issue, it's so important for all levels of governments, stakeholder agencies, not-for-profits, and all those who would like to see an end to homelessness to work collaboratively to find some amicable solutions to the immediate needs as well as some longer-term solutions.

BK: What is happening with the portable housing unit that the county has acquired? CD: Throughout the pandemic we received funds from the federal government for an isolation site that is a trailer model and now that the pandemic and the requirement for this facility is no longer what it was during the pandemic, we are looking at options of what we can do with this asset. One of the things that has been discussed has been the potential of relocating it from its current site in Bellville to another site in Hastings County to help support some sort of model, potentially a warming centre. This asset presents an opportunity to look at some other solution.

BK: Do you have some specific information about the portable housing unit, size, how many people can be accommodated, are there any specific requirements, etc.? CD: It's an open space with partition walls and that's how it was used throughout the pandemic. In addition to the open space there is one office in there as well as washrooms, so there's some flexibility within how that structure can be used. With that being said, it's still a smaller structure and in terms of the square footage I don't have that [information] off the top of my head, but it's one where however it's used has to take into consideration the amount of space in there. It's not a full building, but there is some opportunity. Whatever options we look at with this structure we will have to work with the local building inspector and local municipality to understand what occupation levels can be there for a structure like this.

BK: It seems that there are some challenges to finding a good site for the structure and one of those challenges is finding a hydro hook up. Can you speak to that? CD: Whatever happens to this facility and the location that is identified, those hook up

costs are a big consideration. When we relocate a structure like this we have to consider that to make sure that it's feasible. We don't want to move something to an area that doesn't have access to services that are needed for it to operate.

BK: If hydro cannot be immediately acquired is there a possibility that generators could be used to supplement the electricity until a hydro hook up can be acquired? CD: This goes into the complexity of operations of any building, let alone anything that is a 24/7 operation or overnight and has to take into consideration many different pieces in terms of the logistics on how something like that plays out, also, [we need to consider] what can and can't be done, [and] the neighboring environment. There's just so much that goes into it in terms of generators operating on a 12-hour basis. Is it financially feasible? All that has to be sorted out. When we talk about any solution or relocation of a building like the structure that we have, we have to work through those details up front to get a sense of what can be done, and it ultimately comes back to the location and the intended use of the structure.

BK: Is there any timeline that has been established as to when the building might be relocated to Bancroft? CD: I don't have a timeline. The availability of this structure is more recent in terms of us identifying it as a potential. So, in terms of timeframes of what the next steps are we are still working through that. There's nothing set in stone of timeframes.

BK: Does the county plan on opening a warming center in Bancroft this year? CD: Through our homelessness prevention program funding pot that comes from Municipal Affairs and Housing division of the province, we do have money dedicated to the operation of warming centers within Hastings County at three different sites within our service area. The funds are there for the operations similar to what we have done in the past couple years. With that being said, it's the same issue that we are running up against, and that's where the trailer conversation is a piece of it, is a location and securing a location. Every year the warming centre comes around we run into this challenge of where and what structure it is going to operate out of. Is it a safe environment? There's a lot that has to go into it, so that's where we're at right now. We're working on potential locations, the trailer being one, but what else might be available in the community recognizing that we do have the funds to see a warming centre operate.

BK: How and when will the warming centre operate? CD: Two years ago the warming centres did operate on a temperature threshold, last year the warming centres across Hastings County operated every night on a set schedule of 7 p.m. to 7 a.m. regardless of what the temperature was. The budget that we came up with for this year is based on that model of operation.

BK: The North Hastings Community Trust has said that they will not be running the warming centre this year, so are you working with the local municipal government to secure another suitable site? CD: That's one that I would have to circle back with our team of Community and Human Services group in terms of what locations we are considering right now, but like I mentioned earlier, it's a similar situation that we've been in in past years. Securing structures and buildings that are suitable for this type of use are challenging and to create or build something like this is a long-term aspect that needs other funding sources to go to it. The creation of the infrastructure for these different supports is key, but it's a longer-term focus that has unique challenges to it as well.

BK: Speaking of longer-term projects, I'm sure that you have heard of the Little Blue Cabin project can you speak to some of the challenges in regards to that longer-term project? CD: Hastings County is aware of the Little Blue Cabin's project and what it's intending on addressing. As with any project, the challenges are securing land, suitable land, land that's zoned appropriately, land that has the appropriate services attached to it, so that's always a challenge. But the other challenge that always comes up is the cost and where these types of initiatives are funded out of. We're limited in terms of what we can do within our property tax revenue, so we have to look at our other funding sources and one being that Homelessness Prevention Program that flows to Hastings County through the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing. For the entire county we receive \$6.2 million on an annual basis, but when we look at the cost to operate these different supports, whether it's supportive housing or whether it's an emergency shelter the costs are immense, especially a 24/7 operation. So, that's where the challenges lie in securing land and securing funds and that's where we continue to pressure [higher levels of government] and advocate for more funds to support homelessness initiatives.

BK: Does the federal government supply any funding for homelessness? CD: Through the federal government Hastings County

receives a minimal amount of about \$200,000 annually through their Reaching Home funding source. Those funds are to be used for the city of Belleville because the city of Belleville has been deemed the designated community for this funding source. We don't have any control over that, it [the funding] is determined by the feds. At the same time there is a rural and remote funding application through the Reaching Home [fund], but communities outside of Belleville have to apply for this funding source. For example, the Little Blue Cabins would be able to apply for this funding, but it is application based and isn't an annual commitment that is received locally from the federal source. It's important to recognize too that the province has understood some of the changes locally and across the province [in terms of] the increased demand and [as a result] we have seen an increase in that homelessness prevention program allocation from the province over the last year in the amount of \$2.7 million. They recognize that there are challenges that the municipalities are facing and as we see the cost of living and inflation rising, the costs to operate these types of supports is also rising.

BK: Some municipalities have declared states of emergency over issues such as spousal abuse and homelessness. Are there any benefits for a municipality if they declare a state of emergency due to the homeless crisis? CD: In terms of municipalities that have declared states of emergency that is typically done by way of a motion from council. I'm not as familiar with what that has resulted in aside from potentially raising some additional awareness to the issues that exist. What I can say is that Hastings County council recently endorsed a resolution from the Association of Municipalities of Ontario to the province making them aware of the issues of homelessness [and] the health considerations. It is a motion that has been endorsed by Hastings County and most of the municipalities across the province raising the alarm of this issue that exists.

BK: Is there anything that you want to add regarding the Sept. 26 homelessness meeting and is there anything that you would like to see come out of it? CD: The one thing I would just add is that when we talk about the issue of providing housing [and] individuals who are experiencing homelessness, to get to a point where we're seeing progressive solutions we really need to be working collaboratively. This is a challenge that isn't going to be solved by one level of government; this isn't going to be solved by one initiative. This is a very complex issue that is being influenced by many different factors, [such as] the availability of housing, the social assistance rates, [and] the cost of living going up. There's just so much going into what we're seeing in terms of individuals not being able to find and secure housing; it's just immense. As we talk about these issues it's the tip of the iceberg and we really need to be working as partners collaboratively to find meaningful solutions and that's a key piece.