

CEO can't vouch for BPL's safety



Bancroft Public Library CEO Chris Stephenson says he leaves the library with a "heavy heart" and wished library patrons well.

/ SARAH SOBANSKI Staff

By Sarah Sobanski

Chris Stephenson has resigned as Bancroft Public Library's CEO.

Stephenson told *Bancroft This Week* he "lives and breathes" public libraries, but suggested he feels stonewalled by the municipality when it comes to ensuring fair wages for staff and addressing the library's accessibility needs.

According to Stephenson, staff members at the library are making less than what the town offered to pay for a new receptionist/admin assistant. The town posted it was hiring for the position on Oct. 11 at a rate of pay of \$23.42.

"A person with a high school education starts at \$5 more than someone who's given their life to the library," said Stephenson, noting the requirements of a minimum Grade 12 education for the posting versus his library employee who has nearly 25 years' experience. In response to pay equity concerns, acting mayor Paul Jenkins said it was up to the library board "the town wasn't responsible for how it is run. The town provides the funding, the library chooses how to spend money, he suggested.

"If you look in the paper over the last week or so, you see ads for libraries in different communities but they're all for part time. It'd be great if there could be sort of a combined effort to make a full-time position so it is sustainable to have a librarian here so they can make a living wage," said Jenkins.

Stephenson said he was working full-time hours on a 28-hour-paid workweek. He noted he knew that would happen when he signed up to move across the country to Bancroft, but it was his duty to seek out fair pay for library employees.

"It's not a personal issue for me," he said. "It's that I can't solve the town's issues. I tried."

Another of those issues is accessibility. Just last week, an elderly woman fell at the library's split-level entrance, said "Stephenson". The library's furnace room was also recently locked by the town as it was unsafe. It's a room Stephenson's been inspecting every morning to keep an eye on furnace and plumbing issues. With library staff no longer allowed in the room, Stephenson said he can't vouch for the safety of the building.

He said the building isn't accessible and it's the last inaccessible library in the "purview of the Southern Ontario Library Service."

Over the last year, council has been in talks with Stephenson to move the library "the most recent possible location was Club 580.

Jenkins said while the operation of the library is not the responsibility of the town, the building is.

"I personally had approached [Stephenson] several times to discuss ideas for a quote unquote library of the future," said Jenkins. He noted the library had agreed to participate in a feasibility study by the town for its move to the club. "This has been a topic for years and years and years in this town."

Stephenson showed *Bancroft This Week* a folder of studies and assessments for library uses and needs dating back nearly two decades. The last workplace needs assessment for the library was done in 2005, which Stephenson updated this July.

Stephenson also presented an article of when the library was moved into its current location in 1973. He said the library's infrastructure hasn't had any major renovations since then and the fight for an accessible library is a legacy passed down from many previous Bancroft library CEOs. He noted his 15-year background in construction and argued the community has "professionals that

have offered their support.?

Jenkins said with provincial accessibility legislation, changes to the library would have to happen sooner rather than later.

‘Whatever we do, we have to do it within the confines of the budget that we’re forced to work with,’ Jenkins explained. ‘We’re looking for creative means of saving money, potentially through government grants, getting the facility and forming a community hub that would have included the library and the seniors over at Club 580.’

He added, ‘It all boils down to money because it is the taxpayers’ dollars. The library is provided with a building right now that we recognize could be a lot better, it certainly isn’t accessible and we need to have an accessible facility by the year 2025.’

Stephenson argued a feasibility study didn’t need to be conducted at the \$20,000 to \$40,000 cost the town suggested it did, nor did it have to be conducted with an outside consultant. The money could be better spent on creating the community hub itself by using a more grassroots approach – building a plan with local people, he said.

Despite tensions around the CEO’s resignation, both Jenkins and Stephenson stressed the importance of libraries in small communities.

Jenkins said he was sorry to see Stephenson go because he had great ideas and wished him the best.

‘We do the best we can in responding. We want to move forward in a positive way,’ said Jenkins. ‘We’ve already laid the groundwork for moving forward with hopefully a better library in the future.’

The library board will meet Nov. 20 to discuss future administration but isn’t planning on hiring a new CEO right away, said Stephenson. First, the board will look at working with surrounding area libraries to offer services across the county as one. This would be instead of having many separate boards so area libraries could focus on programs and services without worrying about administration. Wollaston Public Library’s CEO also recently resigned.

Stephenson said he ‘would’ve stayed [with the library] for years and years’ and wished he could have helped build a better library.