

Council discusses transportation in Hastings Highlands

By Nate Smelle

During the Wednesday, July 15 meeting of Council in Hastings Highlands, The Rural Overland Utility Transit's (TROUT's) executive director Gordon MacDonald answered questions from Council in an effort to help them achieve clarity before making a decision whether or not to continue funding the transportation service. Council voiced concerns in five main areas. The first was whether the newly formed partnership between TROUT and would influence their gas tax rebate.

"We are still a not-for-profit corporation and as a not-for-profit corporation we have a contract with R and L Buslines? a for-profit organization," said MacDonald.

"Under the corporations act we are able to have that kind of contract. We are also able as a not-for-profit to operate for-profit business under our umbrella, so it does not affect the gas tax in any way."

Second, Council requested assurance that the \$8,153 contribution would provide bi-weekly service to the end of the year the entire municipality. MacDonald said Community Care would happily enter into such a contractual agreement. Council also wanted to know if they would be obligated to enter into a five-year contract to continue receiving the service.

"It's very difficult to operate year-to-year not knowing whether we are going to get the funding or not," he told Council.

"There is also some predictability in terms of gas tax rebates when we know that we have a commitment from the municipality. We certainly would appreciate a contract. We've been operating the service since 1994 and we had asked for nothing up until 2010. We think that we have a commitment to you and your municipality and we are asking for some reciprocity."

Council also wanted to know if during the days when TROUT was providing service to Hastings Highlands if Bancroft residents will have to pay for the service as they use it.

"It is a public transit service and as such anyone wishing to board the bus made for a fair two dollars," MacDonald said.

"The fare applies each time a rider boards. The bus is also available the same days to bring riders from Bancroft to Hastings Highlands bi-weekly. Although this ridership is sporadic there is potential to develop Hastings Highlands ridership from Bancroft to Hastings Highlands. Your support of moving traffic to Hastings Highlands is absolutely essential."

Lastly, Council wanted to know what the current relationship, and the difference between Bancroft Community Transit (BCT) and TROUT. MacDonald called BCT a respected transportation provider and administrator of several social enterprises in the area.

"There are clear criteria mandates that separate the clients we serve," he said.

"Our social enterprises are complementary. We support the efforts of BCT and the contribution they make to this community. In one word our relationship is, collaborative."

Helping to clarify things further was the director of operations at BCT, Gwen Coish.

"We are specialized transportation service not a public transit system," she explained.

"That doesn't mean that we can't pick up people in charge them a fare for a ride. We do that here and in Belleville. The service that we provide requires 24 hours notice, so if we have someone who needs to get to somewhere in Bancroft they call us the day before, before noon and we put them on the schedule."

Pointing out that BCT provides semi-regular trips to families in need of a ride to gymnastics on a weekly basis, Coish says the organization will do all it can to meet the needs of its clients. Even though these types of trips are not exactly what she would consider a regular route, Coish is confident they can be.

Highlighting a couple of new initiatives, Coish brought up the recently erected building in Riverside Park affectionately called the Heart of the Park. Housing the Wattle and Daub Café and a recreational equipment rental facility called Pedal and Paddle, the building acts as a centre for youth empowerment. BCT has also decided to utilize the commercial-grade kitchen for workshop series called, Round Table Kitchens.

Recognizing a greater need for their services and programs than their funding from the United Way, Coish said BCT "felt the need to do something dramatic to keep up with the needs in a community." In 2014 BCT provided 20,942 rides in North Hastings, of which 3,168 rides were to clients who reside in Hastings Highlands. For the most part, she said BCT provides transportation to client 54 years of age and younger. They currently have three vans on the road and one wheelchair van on the way.

"Our medical transportation takes us to Toronto, Ottawa, Kingston, Brockville and Peterborough and all places in between," Coish said.

A distinct and specialized transportation service, BCT supports low income families by providing access to basic needs, a connection to the workforce and to programs that improve their quality of life.