

Councillor Fentie found not in conflict over Nellie Lunn board

By Bill Kilpatrick

This is part three and the final part of Bancroft This Week and The Bancroft Times' coverage of the Dec. 12, 2023 Wollaston council meeting. The issue of the 'special firehall levy' once again saw multiple intense exchanges around the council table. The levy raised a number of concerns such as legality, the impact on low-income earners in Wollaston, and the ability of the municipality to continue to maintain service levels and pay for the principle and interest. The current cost for the principle and interest is approximately \$170,000 per year or around 10 per cent of the budget according to the preliminary budget estimates. Councillor JD Fentie's motion 'directs the clerk to investigate the possibility of implementing a special levy to cover the cost of the firehall construction loan' and then bring back findings at the Jan. 9 meeting. The motion was brought forward by councillor Fentie who spoke to the motion first stating, 'I think it speaks for itself. We have a pretty substantial chunk of our budget that goes to one specific item and I'm just looking for ways to share the load on that.' Fuerth then asked Potter if he has had any experience with levies outside the normal tax levies, Potter replied in the affirmative, but was not sure if it would apply in this case. Mortimer asked Fentie why he wanted to explore a special levy as opposed to just raising taxes. Fentie replied that, 'A tax increase would just affect taxpayers; a special levy can go broader than that. It is a complicated question and that's why I'm looking for guidance on it,' he explained, adding that, 'we know we have a big chunk of money going out and we need to find ways of addressing that or we are going to have to reduce services dramatically. And we know it's not going to go away.' Fentie added that with all the increases from inflation it provides further fiscal challenges to the municipality pointing out that, 'this is the beginning of the investigation to understand if there's anything we can do.' Ordanis stated very bluntly that he does not support a special levy adding that, 'Since we've been elected I've gotten more feedback on this particular motion than anything else that's come before council and people have made it clear that they do not want to pay more taxes.' Ordanis said that he would like to see a report come from the treasurer regarding their fiscal situation, calling the move to examine a special levy 'premature,' adding that he believes they should first be asking the province for interest relief based on the lower-than-average income levels in Wollaston. Ordanis also wants to have the asset management plan completed, the community improvement plan completed, a strategic plan in place as well, before the municipality 'starts going into any special levies or extra methods to bring money in,' said Ordanis. He would much rather see the municipality explore current fiscal tools such as taxation and borrowing from reserves before any other methods are explored, 'obviously the firehall is an incredible burden on the community,' he said, 'but we're managing it the best we can and I think the feedback that I've gotten from people is that they would rather see us push forward and see us manage it within our means even if it means services and different things having to be adjusted than asking them for more money.' Fuerth then jumped in stating that he was also against the levy pointing out that he does not 'think it's fair that the person with the million-dollar cottage versus the person with the hundred thousand dollar house are paying the same amount of money.' Fentie reiterated the complexity of the issue and how all of the previously mentioned issues need to be explored and then asked council if they would like him to put together a report that brings all the aforementioned concerns together. Fentie added that the 'intent of this is not to find some way to put a cookie cutter number on everybody in the township, because I agree, that's not appropriate. If you have somebody with a million dollar second home you're not going to charge them the same amount as the 90 year old woman on a fixed income living on main street. That's completely inappropriate.' Fentie said that he just wants to explore 'what's possible' adding that 'it may be that nothing is possible,' including a levy. Currie said that she sees this as a 'research piece' that is meant to educate council on possible options and to weigh 'pros and cons,' adding that she would like to first explore the option raised by Ordanis regarding interest relief from the province. Currie cited the financial indicators that are put out by the province that, according to her, state that, 'Wollaston is faced with financial challenges.' When it finally came time to vote on Fentie's motion Fuerth and Ordanis were the only deciders and the motion passed. Prior to question period councillor Fentie put another motion on the table under new business, regarding an alleged conflict of interest relating to him serving on both council and on the Friends of Nellie Lunn board of directors. Fentie said, 'There's been some concern that I've been acting in a conflict of interest.' Fentie explained that the Integrity Commissioner, Robert Swayze, provided him with a written opinion back in March and that he would like the municipality to make it public on their web page and Facebook page since allegations are still swirling that he is in conflict. He added that he had discussed the issue with the previous clerk and she felt that in order for the municipality to release the findings it would be appropriate to request council's approval. After council approved the motion Potter said that he might be required to ask the Integrity Commissioner for something in writing before it gets posted to which Fentie agreed. On Dec. 18 Wollaston Township posted the following press release on their social media pages

regarding Councillor Fentie: ?Email: March 1, 2023CONFIDENTIALDear Councillor Fentie:Because you did not refer to it, I will begin by assuming:

- That you do not own land near the park, the value of which might be impacted by the sale of the park, and

That you are not paid for sitting on the park board.If that is the case, you do not have a pecuniary interest in participating and voting on park matters which may come to council. In fact, you did not have a pecuniary interest sitting on both the council and the not for profit board. I will make another assumption that you felt that you had a personal conflict because you could not be impartial on issues relating to the park. This is your decision in future but I would dismiss any complaint about your participation and voting. In my opinion, you have no pecuniary conflict and will not violate the Municipal Conflict of Interest Act or the Council Code of Conduct if you participate in debate and voting on the issue.?Following the approval of Fentie's motion council opened up the meeting to questions from the floor prompting a heated exchange between a constituent and councillor's Currie and Fentie. Constituent Darren Steven's stood up and asked Councillor Currie if she indeed said earlier in the year that she stepped down from the Nellie Lunn board of directors to which she replied, ?Yes.? Stevens then asked Fentie the same question which provoked this exchange:Fentie to the mayor: ?I think the purpose of question period is to entertain questions from the public??Stevens interjecting: ?Those are questions.?Fentie: ?not necessarily to? [inaudible]Stevens: ?Okay then I'll continue if you're just going to talk over me.?Fentie: ?Mayor, point of order.?Fuerth: ?What's your point of order??Fentie: ?I believe as written in the bylaw [it says] question period is an opportunity for members of the public to present questions that may or may not be answered in this forum.?Fuerth: ?You can just say ?no comment.'?Stevens: ?You don't have to answer me.?Currie: ?I chose to answer you.?Stevens: ?You did. Next question, you said you stepped down, but I have a document here that says you haven't [stepped down and it's] dated Nov. 23, 2023. Did you guys not run on transparency? Is that not a lie? That's all I got.?Currie: ?I'll respond to that. There's perhaps other information, I'm not entirely sure what your looking at. Is it from the Ontario Business registry?Stevens: ?It is [the] not-for-profit, yes.?Currie: ?It could well be out of date.?Stevens: ?No, it's not. The report is November 2023.?Currie: ?I'm speaking of it being kept up to date. What I can assure you is that I resigned from the board of Nellie Lunn in March or late February, I can't remember the date, and I don't think that I need to say anything more. I resigned.?Stevens: ?Sure.?Fentie to Stevens: ?What is it that you think you're going to achieve by this? Do you think?Stevens: ?I don't have to answer your questions.?Fentie: ?You're absolutely right, you don't. My response to your question is twofold, whether we stepped down or not we don't have a conflict that's clear, to the point of whether I lied to the public or not, that's obviously an important question. Did I step down? Yes. Did I issue an email direction to that? Yes?Stevens: ?Not until after you were elected. Several months in.?Fentie: ?Correct.?Stevens: ?Did you step down??Fentie: ?Yes.?Stevens: ?When you ran on a campaign and sued the township costing us [the] taxpayers to defend that [lawsuit] and then you got elected??Fentie: ?Sorry what's the question??Stevens: ?Sorry, I'm sorry JD. You're smarter than the rest of us. Have a good day.? Stevens then left the room.Bancroft This Week followed up with councillor's Currie and Fentie regarding their resignations and Fentie supplied Bancroft This Week with an email that appears to give his legal counsel direction to remove himself and Currie from the board.The email is dated March 3, 2023 and it stated that the ?officers leaving the organization [The Friends of Nellie Lunn] are Shelia Currie and John David Fentie.? However, it was not clear if the changes were actually submitted to the government. Currie also sent an email stating, ?I did personally resign from the Board at a meeting the day before (March 2).?Bancroft This Week further requested the Friends of Nellie Lunn meeting minutes from the March 2 meeting where Currie alleged that she resigned, but as of press time those documents were not provided.