

County responds to HH development questions

By Sarah Sobanski

County answers for economic development questions have left Hastings Highlands representatives with mixed feelings.

Responding in a letter, county Warden Rodney Cooney answered questions pertaining to economic development including if a county grant program for member municipalities could be available and if communications between the county and the municipality could be improved. The questions were posed by council to the county during its delegation in June.

‘Warden Cooney writes of many good and positive future plans and initiatives,’ said Councillor Alex Walder after reading the county’s responses. ‘Some for the county as a whole and some directed at Hastings Highlands.’ Our council has taken a serious step to invite and question the county leadership. I would characterize the overall tone of the responses letter as forward looking. With that in mind, I anticipate that our job is not done.’

According to the letter, ‘county council will from time to time consider individual requests for grants, each evaluated on its merits. For example, a request for financial assistance to support the North Hastings Hospital in Bancroft was unanimously endorsed by county council.’ Cooney speaks of initiatives the county is participating in the response, but rarely mentions Maynooth or Hastings Highlands ‘something Walder drew attention to when the county visited.

Mayor Vivian Bloom however, said between the county’s two nursing homes and emergency services, it takes care of the municipality in more ways than one.

‘One of the ones we see most every day and do not realize it comes through us, is services to all people of the county, especially medical and human services,’ said Bloom. ‘I see ambulances going all the time and these are people hired through the county.’ Any time there is an emergency, whether it be flooding in the spring, or perhaps a large power outage like we all experienced a few years ago, there is help we can access for shelter, food and other needs, as well the county will access the Red Cross on our behalf and have them here if needed. People do not see the silent parts of what is available to them unless there is a need or we ask for it.’

Cooney wrote that the county’s economic and tourism development unit’s activities and information reach member municipalities in a variety of ways through municipal staff and municipal organizations. He also suggested the county looks for input when it comes to economic development and that it relies on feedback from municipal representatives of county council.

‘A key way information is shared is through the municipal Economic Development Partners Group. One of the major goals of this group is to increase communication not only between the county and member municipalities but also amongst member municipalities themselves. Currently, Mayor Vivian Bloom represents Hastings Highlands within this group. One of the requirements of membership of the partners group is that they report back to their respective councils on activities by county staff and other member municipalities. In addition, members are required to provide updates on their own municipality’s initiatives back to the municipal partners group,’ Cooney responded.

Bloom agreed that it was her responsibility to bring county initiatives back to council.

‘Help is there in so many ways for us to access to do this ourselves. Many municipalities have very good economic development staff, something at the time Hastings Highlands does not have. We access the wonderful work done by the Maynooth and Hastings Highlands Business Association, just as Bancroft has the BBIA working hard to promote their town. Hastings County promotes the county as a whole, but staff are there for any help we want from them at any time,’ said Bloom.

Leaving responsibility to the mayor, however, led Walder to more questions.

‘If more is required from our representative to county, where is the commensurate support? If more is expected from our business owners and associations, where is the outreach? If more is needed from the EDPG and Economic Tourism Development Advisory Committee, then where is the ability of these people to have their ideas and expertise activated?’ asked Walder.

He added, ‘The questions were phrased to seek concrete and specific actions that are underway by the county on behalf of economic development in Hastings Highlands. The responses mainly focus on future plans and considerations that are contemplated or planned by county administration. In the answers, much onus is diverted onto our representative to county council, onto various committee members and onto private business owners. The answers given are heavy with reactive and light on proactive involvements of county officials.’

A total of 13 questions were answered in the county letter. Walder told *Bancroft This Week* it would be available for the public in the agenda of a coming meeting of council.