

Economic crystal ball seems cloudy



North Hastings Economic Development chair Cathy Trimble, right, and new worker Dusty Laface review the Hastings map used at trade shows.

TONY PEARSON Special to This Week

By Tony Pearson

Some people foresee a sunny year developing; some find the horizon very cloudy. To a degree, it's like the opening of Dickens' Tale of Two Cities: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times; it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair; we had everything before us, we had nothing before us."

Some state that Bancroft's core is in danger of becoming a ghost town. But to Bancroft Councillor Mary Kavanagh, township liaison to The Bancroft Business Improvement Association, the road leads upward. She notes that new businesses have recently opened in downtown Bancroft, such as the Hastingsstation Restaurant and the Emporium, and more new stores are in the works. She feels that with proper promotion and signage, more of those who now drive right through town could be persuaded to stop and shop. She also suspects the area can attract more "junior seniors" retirees between 50 and 65, who might not only settle but take up new business ventures.

The North Hastings Economic Development Committee buys into that possibility; they have launched a new campaign aimed at urban dwellers called "Do the math; live the difference." This asks home owners in places like the GTA to consider how much can be done with the difference between the selling price in their Toronto home and the purchase price of a larger home in North Hastings. The NHEDC hopes this will attract not only seniors, but young entrepreneurs. However, the committee feels that Internet connectivity needs to be up to speed for this to happen.

NHEDC chair Cathy Trimble sees a busy summer coming up. She also feels that effective promotion and signage can prove effective in drawing people. She suggests a revival of the old "scenic routes" as one possibility including their inclusion on new county maps. She also foresees the development of more tourist-oriented partnerships e.g., "picnics to go" offered by town grocery stores would encourage people to make a day of it in the area.

Others temper their assessments. Emma Kearns of the Bancroft Realtors Association anticipates in a good year for cottage sales, as well as for homes outside the Town of Bancroft. However, she feels that the higher tax levels in Bancroft will discourage home purchases there.

Greg Webb, director of the Chamber of Commerce, describes the economic path in the area as more like a roller coaster. Businesses open and close often, he notes, and observes that business owners are under pressure from rising costs, notably steep increases in hydro fees. He further states that some businesses were adversely affected by the short mild winter for example, snowmobile traffic was down. On the other hand, he says, the early spring means an early start for seasonal businesses, which is an advantage. All in all, he expects a good summer.

As for events to draw traffic, Kavanagh states that the Wheels/Water/Wings weekend is expanding, with a new display category: ?rat rods? (a new hot rod variant), and the return of a Midway. She also expects the motorcycle component to expand.

Webb adds that in addition to its signature event, the summer Rockhound Gemboree, the Chamber will be staging a ?psychic fair? in May (which brings to mind the classic question: Why do psychic phone lines have to ask for your credit card number?)

Looking further down the road, a big question is whether the proposed Earth Sciences Centre, which has the potential to become an economic magnet, will prove affordable and sustainable; the consultant report on this is due soon.

And on more mundane financial issues, Bancroft Mayor Bernice Jenkins hopes ? indeed, considers essential ? that the town can swiftly solve its money-leaking sewer problems.

One big-money issue raised last year ? the idea of extending the town sewer north ? has moved to the back burner, with a grant request for a preliminary engineering study turned down by the province.

So come the fall, we'll find out whether the optimists were right, or conversely, whether the economic sky is in danger of falling.