

Garbage and democracy

By **Tony Pearson**

My garbage wasn't picked up this week. The garbage truck had a break-down. No big deal ? it'll get picked up this week. It's great to have pick-up, period. Like many people in the area, at my previous house I had to cart my refuse and recyclables to a waste disposal site.

But it made me think about the impact of the different levels of government on our lives.

For example, the federal government has very little direct impact on my life. I do receive Old Age Security, that's true. (By the way, can't they think of a better name for it? Like Senior Citizen Appreciation? Or Silver Hair Benefit?) But other than that, there isn't much connection. Moving to the provincial level brings more direct interaction ? specifically, health care, an issue of importance to us all. For a great many people ? youth and parents ? there's another daily link through the education system. The direction of education in preparing young people for tomorrow's economy is actually vital to everyone (including me, if I'm to continue receiving my pension). And our community is policed by the OPP, although they charge the townships for it.

As for the county level, thankfully I don't require their biggest-budget items: social assistance or long-term care (i.e. nursing home) ? though of course many do.

But it is at the municipal level that most of the operations that directly touch my daily life are rooted. Roads. Garbage. Water. Sewers. I know right away if my garbage isn't picked up, or there's brown water coming out of my taps, or my street doesn't get plowed.

However, it is the federal government that draws most of our attention. The doings of the politicians and public servants in Ottawa dominate the media. Federal government affairs are on TV and radio every day. And needless to say, of the money I pay in taxes, the largest chunk goes to Ottawa ? which certainly gets my attention in April.

As well, federal politics can dominate discussion, including at the local level. For example, last week's rote right-wing rant concerned Justin Trudeau's decision not to drop more bombs on Syria and Iraq. An interesting debating point, but not one with much application to North Hastings.

Don't get me wrong; I too am very interested in federal politics. I was very glad to see the back of Stephen Harper, since I believe he did a lot of damage to Canada: its political climate, its environment, its culture, its civil rights, and its veterans, among other items. But neither Harper nor Trudeau has had much impact on my day-to-day concerns. In truth, the level of government to which we need to pay the most attention is local. Yet this is the level that commands the least media attention, and which historically sees the lowest level of voter turnout during elections.

Some local township councils haven't had any public attention for decades. In the case of one smaller township, a municipal councillor told me that no one but council and staff had attended a council meeting in years.

We at Bancroft This Week try to provide detailed coverage of Bancroft and Wollaston town councils. But even that doesn't guarantee public engagement with local issues. Thus, a municipally-organized town hall held this fall in Bancroft attracted less than a couple of dozen members of the public. On the other hand, the federal all-candidates' debate saw the local Legion filled to capacity. It surely isn't the lack of issues at the municipal level.

In Bancroft, the annual budget decision is fraught with danger, as the high level of debt and tax rates battles with the need for repairs to aging infrastructure (such as the sewer system and deteriorating main roads like Chemaushgon) and with new initiatives to spur economic development, such as the extension of the sewer system to the north, and the potential tourist magnet of the Earth Science Centre. Such decisions merit a high level of public engagement, and a lot of back-and-forth discussion.

Will they get it? Probably not. More's the pity. I will say that our elected representatives try to connect with the public as much as possible. MPP Todd Smith meets regularly with community representatives. New MP Mike Bossio is trying to make himself available to the public as much as possible. And local councillors are as close as a (local) phone call.

So give them all a hand ? but especially the members of your local council. They are grappling every month with the issues that concern you most. Let them know what you think. The idea of the town hall meeting is at the heart of North American democracy.

And the more people who take part in democracy, the better for the democratic process.