

Hastings Highlands council wants development promises

By Sarah Sobanski

Hastings Highlands councillors are butting heads with county representatives over economic development funding.

Warden Rodney Cooney, county CAO Jim Pine, and local Association of Municipalities of Ontario representative and Tweed Mayor Jo-anne Albert stopped by council June 28 to talk about where county money goes and economic development.

‘We serve some of our most vulnerable residents in our 14 municipalities. I know within my own municipality, the services the county provides wouldn't be affordable [without the county],’ Cooney started off the county's delegation. He's also the mayor of Stirling-Rawdon.

Pine led council through a pie graph of the county's budget ? 55 per cent to community and human services, 23 per cent to long-term care, which includes the county's two long-term care facilities including Centennial Manor in Bancroft, and 13 per cent to emergency services.

‘Both long-term care and emergency services ? are 24-7 operations. So they're going all the time, every day, all day long,’ explained Pine. Long-term care costs the county nearly \$30.6 million and emergency services costs \$18.3 million of the just more than \$135 million budget.

The big questions following the county's delegation were after taxation answers.

More than 20 cents of each tax dollar from Hastings Highlands goes to the county. More than 50 cents stays within the municipality and 24 cents contributes to others, such as the Ministry of Education.

Hastings Highlands contributes about 19 per cent to the county's tax levy. That's nearly two per cent of the county's total revenues and the largest contribution by any member municipality.

‘Hastings Highlands was mentioned only once to confirm that we are the highest contributor,’ said Councillor Alex Walder of economic development and funding projects for the county.

The atmosphere in the room grew tense. Pine shared a look with Cooney.

Both North Hastings Hospital and the Bancroft Community Airport will receive funding this year, but Walder wanted to know what money would come directly to Hastings Highlands instead of surrounding townships.

‘The economic development is a huge interest for Hastings Highlands because we're a huge contributor to the county,’ continued Walder. ‘It is in both our best interests to have a healthy, economic situation at Hastings Highlands. You'll forgive me if I feel the county [is] somewhat looking elsewhere rather than Hastings Highlands.’

Pine responded that each member-municipality of the county met last year to discuss economic development for a county as a whole.

‘To characterize us in failing on that is unfair, I'll be quite frank ? Everybody recognizes the importance of Hastings Highlands,’ said Pine. ‘We had a report done and we're implementing it right now. We've hired our business advisor, who's talking to the businesses directly including up here. We're putting together a marketing plan that will highlight all of the municipalities including Hastings Highlands.’

Walder went on to ask for a list of concrete plans for economic development in Hastings Highlands.

Council had previously sent questions for the county to speak to at the delegation concerning economic development for the area. County representatives had not received the questions until the night before and didn't have many specific answers for the municipality.

‘I will say that in the written responses that are coming that they'll address that,’ replied Pine, adding that the questions were with his staff and written responses were being prepared.

Pine also noted there was now a county advisory committee for economic development. Councillor Tracy Hagar asked why she hadn't been notified of the meeting to attend. Pine replied that the first meeting had only included committee stakeholders.

‘This isn't just about the county deciding what we can do for you,’ said Pine. ‘It's about you helping us decide what's right for Hastings Highlands and all the member municipalities. I'm hoping that you'll participate in that effort as that goes on.’