

Hastings Highlands works on budget

By Tony Pearson

Policing costs are hitting Hastings Highlands hard, as its council tries to balance its books over the coming year. Recent letters to the editor speak of a public outcry at a suggested tax hike of nearly five per cent. But Mayor Vivian Bloom states that the tax increase is really in two parts. The costs of providing municipal services – expenditures within the control of council – indicate a tax rate increase of 1.2 per cent, well in line with other townships. But a hefty hike in OPP fees – over \$225,000 in 2016 – will add 3.6 per cent to the tax bill.

This is the result of a revised formula for calculating what the provincial police charge for their services. In North Hastings, the results are a slight decrease in Bancroft's charges, combined with serious increases in fees for other municipalities.

Said Bloom: "If it had been as easy as just readjusting Bancroft down closer to other municipalities, the impact wouldn't be that great. However the province used the chance to look at options, and now we are suffering from a new form of downloading, using a totally new funding formula. This is what has driven our policing costs up immensely in 2014 and 2015." She added that many groups in the province are working on trying to get the flaws in the new system acknowledged and corrected by the ministry. Roads, of course, are always a major community problem. Hastings Highlands claims over a thousand kilometres to maintain and clear. As for capital costs, the municipality is currently focused on repairing Highway 62, which they claim is way past its "best-before" date, and continues to suffer major damage from logging and other heavy trucks, mostly from outside the area. Having tried and been rejected for provincial funding under various programs, including Connecting Link, the town is going it alone on the first parts of the repair, on sections between Maynooth and Maple Leaf. "Although very costly," stated Bloom, "these repairs are of the utmost importance at this time."

There's also bridge work. Interestingly, one bridge worked on recently serves only a single family. However, the law says that the property must be accessible by fire and fuel delivery trucks, which the current bridge is not. Another bridge on the Musclow-Greenview Road requires much more expensive and costly repairs. One new hope council is pursuing is the new federal government infrastructure grants program. One ground for this request is that climate change has created problems with culverts and bridges as well as roads.

Waste remains a very controversial subject. The loss of garbage pick-up continues to be debated back-and-forth. Many claim that the service was "entrenched" at the time of amalgamation. Bloom insists: "Nothing can be guaranteed forever." She states "Failing to find a firm willing to take on this job was the reason council voted to end the service." The claim that \$250,000 is set aside in the budget for pick-up is also contested by Bloom: "With the resolution to end curbside, it was no longer in the budget. However, due to public pressure, council tried again last year to find a way to reinstate it. Unfortunately, the effort was without success."

Hastings Highlands claims to have more waste sites than any other town of its size in the province. Of course, closing some would not save money, as closure costs can exceed operating expenses. "Perhaps transforming some into waste transfer stations would represent a way around this expense," Bloom suggested. "The municipality is examining this and other possibilities." "Council and staff are still working hard at that budget," Bloom insists, "and we may be able to find other economies. But we can't avoid a tax hike of some size, as most of our rising costs, like hydro, are beyond our control. The big uncontrollable factor is the 3.6 per cent increase for which the OPP is responsible. We definitely need a fairer formula. Otherwise, this is out of our hands, just like county and education levies are beyond our control."