

Here to stay



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By Nate Smelle

As municipalities throughout North Hastings and across the province prepare to swear in their new council members on Monday, Dec. 3, one cannot help but hope that the inauguration of these newly elected officials means that good times are coming. As usual, during the campaign more promises were made than could certainly ever be kept. While some committed to unbridled economic growth by cutting red tape, others committed to responsible environmental stewardship and sustainable growth. It is no secret that a disproportionate abundance of funding flows down from upper levels of government to municipalities south of Highway 7 compared to the amount of support that reaches communities north of this border. Recognizing this long-term trend in North Hastings, we need to come to terms with the fact that once again we will be pushing our boulder uphill for the next four years in order to appease the appetites of the voters who reside in the sprawling cities and towns so common south of Highway 7.

Looking back on how this legacy of poverty in North Hastings has taken shape, it is clear that us northern dwellers have become complacent with this status quo which serves the interests of larger centres while stripping away our resources and depleting our ability to meet the basic needs of our municipalities.

Faced with the unavoidable reality of having to satisfy the same basic needs as our neighbouring communities to the south, our somewhat fresh crop of recently elected or acclaimed officials in the North of 7 must realize the formidable challenge they have ahead of them in their quest for progress. Before these politically engaged individuals begin their personal journey in governance, I urge them to start asking the two big questions. These being: what exactly does progress mean for us northern dwellers; and, what is our best course of action to achieve it?

Now, for some the path to progress in the North is paved only with the strict dedication to finding efficiencies under every unturned stone. However, the fatal flaw in this approach is that if we base our future on doing less with less over and over again, we will quickly find ourselves in a race to the bottom ? a race that some might already say we have won in many regards. Essential public services such as health care and education are two examples of essential public services that are continuously forced to make miracles happen with less resources and programming. Future generations rely on these institutions to shape their understanding of progress, yet we repeatedly neglect them.

Finding efficiencies may be important, but it is only one piece of the progress puzzle. We are often told in the North that we need to welcome all development with open arms and without limitations if we want to expand our tax base and attain economic prosperity. Certainly, with the amount of resources ? water, trees, metals, minerals, aggregate, etc. ? we have in the North, our communities could sustain ourselves for a fair amount of time by simply continuing to sell off our natural capital at discount prices to improve the quality of life of the city dwellers pushing northward. This, however is not a good example of long-term thinking. Over time, every mining project, every quarry, every cookie-cutter subdivision and the usual retail outlets that pop up around them will chip away at our ability to sustain ourselves and the very elements that define our communities as world-class tourist destinations.

Luckily, with a healthy dose of new blood to rejuvenate our municipal governments on the way, this no longer needs to be the case. The most valuable resource our municipal representatives can bring to the table over the next four years is ideas. As a citizenry it is our job to pay attention to which of these individuals are truly working on our behalf. We need to acknowledge their good ideas and support them when they need us. This is the only way democracy can be an effective tool for change.

Studying up on how to create healthy communities through design I stumbled upon a lecture by architect William McDonough on what progress can and should look like. During his speech, McDonough explained how what he identifies as 'eco-effective design' can be employed to alleviate poverty, nurture food security, fight climate change and promote personal and ecological health. Rather than defining progress in terms of being 'less bad,' he suggests striving for abundance. Ultimately, McDonough said this means supporting initiatives and industries that operate as if they planned to stay.

By eliminating the false notion of there being an 'away' where we can dispose of our toxic waste, McDonough said we realize how limited and self-destructive our business as usual and at all costs mentality is. Declaring that everyone is a designer because everyone has intentions, he said what we need is a new design assignment in which we need to 'Design a system that doesn't produce any hazardous toxic materials and put it in your air, your soil, and your water. Measures prosperity by how much natural capital you can put into constant closed cycles that are healthy and propitious. That measures progress by how few buildings you have that have smokestacks. How about buildings that have no pipes. Not little pipes, no pipes. Imagine designing a system that doesn't require any complex regulations because you are not trying to kill each other and do nothing to create intergenerational remote tyranny.'

As co-designers of our shared future we must demand that our elected officials act with both our current and long-term interests in mind. By doing this we send the message that we as a community are here to stay.