

Highlands East makes investment in new area doctor

By Angelica Blenich

The following are brief reports of items discussed during an April 13 meeting of Highlands East council.

The municipality of Highlands East has entered into a medical services agreement with Hastings County which will bring a much needed physician to the area in 2018.

The agreement, approved by councillors at their meeting, is between the municipality, Hastings County and medical student Megan Elizabeth Fitzgerald, who is currently attending med school full-time.

Highlands East has agreed to provide financial assistance to Fitzgerald, in exchange for her commitment to setting up her practice in the area upon her graduation from university.

The municipalities together have agreed to pay \$150,000 to Fitzgerald, to cover tuition, books and living expenses, according to the bylaw.

In exchange, Fitzgerald has agreed to practice family medicine in Highlands East and Hastings County on a full-time basis within three months of graduating, for a period of at least five years.

The arrangement will see the physician split her time between two areas, on an alternating schedule with her practising two days a week in Hastings County and three days a week in Wilberforce, switching each week.

If Fitzgerald fails to meet her requirements of the agreement, including graduating from med school or setting up a practice in the area, the municipalities are no longer responsible for paying her \$150,000.

The payments will work out to be \$25,000 paid to Fitzgerald on an annual basis, beginning next May and taking place every January following until 2020.

The arrangement will be a partnership either with the North Hastings Family Health Team or Bancroft Family Health Team, said Reeve Dave Burton following the meeting. Both Family Health Teams operate within Hastings County.

Fitzgerald is from the Maynooth area, said Burton, who is thrilled to have her set-up practice in Highlands East.

"I'm pretty excited about it," he said. "It's a good news story for Highlands East ... she has been through our medical centre."

Burton is hoping the municipality will get some help in the interim, as Fitzgerald won't be arriving for a few years. However the agreement is a step in the right direction, he believes.

"This is a tremendous start for us ... for the future," he said.

Councillor Joan Barton credits the reeve for working tirelessly for the past few years to bring a physician to Highlands East.

"He deserves real credit for forging the relationship we have with County of Hastings and their physician recruiting team from scratch," she said in an email to the paper. "I think having a doctor located in Wilberforce will be a huge boost for all of Highlands East and will be a factor from this point forward in ensuring stable prosperous communities here."

The agreement has not yet been signed by Fitzgerald, according to clerk Irene Cook.

Fitzgerald is expected to graduate from her medicine program around September 2018.

New CBO appointed/fire chief reappointed

A familiar face will be seen around Highlands East as councillors officially appointed Laurie Devolin as the new chief building official.

Devolin replaces former CBO Randy Dunsmore, who resigned from the position on Aug. 1, 2014.

Her most previous position was at the township of Algonquin Highlands, where she was the deputy chief building official/bylaw enforcement officer.

The new CBO will take over from Bill Wingrove, who was acting as interim CBO while the municipality went through a hiring process.

Wingrove reported to council that construction values this year are almost double what they were in 2014.

Wingrove has been reappointed to the position of Highlands East fire chief, which was held on an interim basis by firefighter Chris Baughman.

Hike Haliburton leaders needed

The trails committee is seeking interested volunteers who would like to share their time and skills with the upcoming Hike Haliburton Festival, scheduled for this September.

Councillor Joan Barton said volunteers are needed to lead hikes in and around Highlands East. The committee is looking for interested individuals by April 30.

Budget to be adopted at May meeting

The municipality is looking to adopt their 2015 budget at their May 11 regular meeting of council, said chief administrative officer and treasurer Sharon Stoughton-Craig.