

Homeless encampment at Community Trust is proving to be challenging for all those involved



By Bill Kilpatrick

On Sept. 10 just after 7 a.m., John Scaife and Dante Gentles, residents at the apartment building at 21 Valley View drive, were woken up suddenly by what they described as a 'loud pop' that seemed to have come from a building next door at the back of the property that belongs to the North Hastings Community Trust. Scaife got up and went out onto his balcony that overlooks the parking lot and backyard of the Trust, and noticed smoke coming from the lean to that was attached to the building and then he heard another loud 'pop' and then he saw flames shoot out of the tarps that were covering the entrance to the lean-to.

Gentles heard the second 'pop' and got out of bed to call the Fire department, but, according to his mother Shawna Lumley, Gentles heard the sirens and decided not to call as the fire department was already on its way.

The fire ended up destroying half of the storage building, five water storage units, a portable toilet, and all of the belongings of a homeless individual that were inside the lean-to. No one was injured in the fire and according to the Ontario Provincial Police, who made an arrest shortly after the fire was extinguished, the investigation into the cause of the fire is still ongoing and the arrest that took place was not in connection to the fire.

As was previously reported in The Bancroft Times, this was the third fire that had happened at the Community Trust in less than a week and the second time the Bancroft Fire Department was dispatched to the Trust. This was but the latest in a series of incidents that have the neighbours on both sides of the Trust worried, anxious, and frustrated.

According to Dianne Eastman, a Community Trust volunteer, 'People who are without homes have been setting up tents in the backyard of our Trust community space on Valley View Drive since the warming centre closed in April. More people came this week [the week of Aug 29]. The encampment is growing. This is not something the Trust is making happen, nor do we want it to happen. It is something that is happening to us. People truly have nowhere else to go.' However, as the encampment grows so to does the laundry list of complaints from their neighbours.

On Sept. 6 a letter of complaint was sent to the Town of Bancroft by a neighbour who wishes to stay anonymous, but the letter is revealing about the situation and the tension that the encampment is creating. It states that, "We can no longer sit out on our balconies without someone walking up bumming smokes or others yelling profanities at each other. They are lurking in the parking lots of the two apartment buildings which is just looking for trouble. The children in these buildings cannot play outside and do not feel safe anymore. We sit on our balcony and they [the members of the encampment] literally strip down butt ass naked and change their clothes several times a day and there are children here that should not be subjected to this. They do have tents set up that they can change in. Something needs to be done and soon before winter to find these guys a proper place to stay." The anonymous neighbour stated that they did not want to "get caught up in the middle," but they appear to be reaching a breaking point.

Steve Bodden, the owner/operator of Steve N Sons Auto and Marine, a business located next to the Community Trust, also shares in the frustration that the homeless encampment is causing. Bodden discovered that he had homeless people living in his shed and in the shed he found numerous glass pipes used for inhaling drugs, along with garbage, and clothing. He also discovered that his shed was damaged with burn marks. Bodden cleaned up the shed and threw all the contents onto the Trust's property stating, "This was my third time going over to the Trust to ask them to clean up."

Bodden spoke about having a stranger approaching his children and how, after asking the person to leave 3 times, the police had to be called to deal with the situation. Bodden says that he had a shower curtain stolen, he has people sleeping in his boats, and people are using the bathroom units that he has for sale. Bodden, it appears, is not without empathy however as he has recently helped with projects at the Trust and even lent them a trailer to move belongings. He also helped start up the safe injection site and donated an auction item to help with revenue. "I'm all for helping them," says Bodden, "I understand that they're [the Community Trust] doing this for the right reasons. I understand that they want to help these people. I understand that these are people that are not in their right frame of mind, but it can't be at the expense of everybody else there and it can't be at the expense of our property values." Bodden said that he has seen multiple naked people walking around and even witnessed a person defecating on his property. "It's just not an appropriate place for these people and I don't know where is." Bodden used to bring his children to work with him occasionally, but he no longer feels comfortable to do so given all that he has witnessed.

Unbeknownst to Bodden, one of the homeless people, with the assistance of members of the Community Trust, moved their tent to the area between the Trust's building and Bodden's building. While it is not totally clear where the property lines are, it is believed that it runs down the middle of that space, which if true, means that the tent was moved onto Bodden's property without his permission or consent.

When Bodden found the tent he approached the person living in it, whom he claimed to have a rapport with as he knew them by name, and asked the person to move the tent from his property and the person began yelling and screaming at him. He then asked two more times over the next two days, and on day three, according to Bodden he called the Community Trust and asked them to come over and clean it up and nothing was done.

On the fourth day, which was the same day Bodden had to clean out his shed after he found out that people had been sleeping in there, "That's when I blew my lid," says Bodden. He said that after he threw all the contents of the shed onto the Trust's property he told them, "If you can't clean this up at the side of my building, then I will."

Bodden gave the employees of the Trust about an hour and when he saw that it was not being cleaned up he took matters into his own hands and began moving the tent and all the contents himself causing a conflict with the homeless person and members of the Trust. "I gave them ample opportunity to clean their own mess up," says Bodden and when nothing happened Bodden felt like he had to do it himself.

According to Bodden, when he asked members of the Trust about who was going to compensate him for cleaning up the mess that those who were encamped at the trust had made and the damage done to his shed he was told, according to Bodden, to send the bill to the Town of Bancroft.

Bodden said that he feels like the people at the Community Trust are not holding the people they are allowing onto their property accountable for their behaviour and it appears that he may have a point. Eastman said that in one of her recent conversations with Bodden she reiterated that, 'People have a right to be here and we're sorry that this has an impact for you. It has a really big impact for us too.' However Eastman went on to say that those in the encampment are 'self-managing' adding that 'They are here with our permission, but we're not running it; We're not organizing it; we are living with it.'

Jane Kali, the executive director of the Community Trust mentioned a similar sentiment stating that, 'We really work hard to not micromanage anybody. We will do everything we can to help you stay in the place you want to be.' However, this philosophy appears to have led to a homeless person's tent being placed on someone else's property without the landowner's permission, which in turn appears to have caused a needless conflict between the homeless person and their neighbour resulting in the homeless person having to move again.

Eastman recognizes, on some level at least, that there needs to be some structure to the encampment given that there are people who have come onto the property in the recent past and intended to do harm to those encamped there. Around Sept. 6 the Trust had an individual come onto their property and light someone's tent on fire and luckily there was no one in it. Eastman pointed out that when the Community Trust had the warming centre they had two security guards and there was, in her words, a 'level of organization.' But she also pointed out that the presence of the security guards created what she called 'a guarded space' which tended to escalate things according to Eastman. What she proposes for the encampment is something she calls a 'caretaker' someone who, in her words will, 'take care, keep the lights on, keep the water running, keep the toilets unplugged and people feel safe because that person's here, and they won't start a fire because a caretaker is here.' As of now the encampment has neither a caretaker or a security guard or any 'level of organization' and that is raising serious safety concerns for those inside and outside the encampment.

A homeless substance user, who, with help, has managed to begin their journey of recovery spoke with Bancroft Councillor Tracy McGibbon about the importance of structure and rules for those within the homeless drug using community. According to McGibbon the person said, 'We need rules. We need rules for our safety and for everybody, so we have to have rules,' and McGibbon could not agree more stating, 'When there aren't rules, that's when things go to crap.'