

Homelessness town hall meeting: Part two



By Bill Kilpatrick

In part one of the homelessness meeting town hall, which can be found in the Oct. 11 edition of The Bancroft Times, numerous participants presented their information and findings regarding their experiences with homelessness in North Hastings. In part two, many of those same participants were asked to form a panel where members of the crowd could ask questions about their presentations or any other questions that they may have about homelessness in North Hastings. The panel consisted of the event organizer Judy Edgar, Staff Sergeant of the Bancroft OPP Jeff MacKinnon, Chief Administrative Officer of Hastings County Connor Dorey, Bancroft Mayor Paul Jenkins, Kevin Taylor of the Little Blue Cabins, Ellen Buck-McFadden who completed two studies on homelessness in North Hastings, Shane Cox and Kathy Shaffer who were security guards at the warming centre last year. Absent was MPP Ric Bresee. The first person who stepped up to the microphone to ask a question self-identified as someone who has struggled with addictions and mental health and pointed out that they know many of the homeless people in and around Bancroft. The questioner went on to suggest a space at the hospital beside the Café that has nursing staff, security, and mental health workers, where the homeless people behind Community Trust could possibly be placed. Question: [Directed to Mayor Jenkins, Staff Sergeant MacKinnon and CAO Dorey] What I want to know is what is going to happen to those people that are in-behind Community Trust who are there now? The Trust is closing so how are you going to force those people from not hanging out? Why can't we open up the hospital as a shelter and put them up there? Edgar: First of all, the Trust isn't closing, okay, just to let you know. They are not closing, the building is still there. MacKinnon: They [the homeless people] are permitted to be there by the Trust as far as I know. It's private property. I have no authority to go in there and ask people to leave. If the Trust was to call us and say, we need some help to remove people, then we would come and help move people along. I don't have the authority to go on private property and remove people unless you are the private property owner and you are calling the police saying that there is somebody trespassing. Jenkins: So, the second part to that is that the Town has by-laws etcetera, if we get complaints we are obligated to instantly act on those complaints. We have seen instances of where we know that there are people who are camping and are not causing any problems. We do not go looking for that particular situation, but when citizens of the adjacent buildings call [with complaints], the Town acts upon them by issuing orders. We cannot actually just go in and remove people at all, all we can do is issue a property standards order or some other regulation, but to get to the point where we can get people removed is a long process that could involve court injunctions etcetera, which is very expensive and can take up to two years. Dorey: The meeting space [at the hospital] that you are speaking about has been investigated over the past few years. It's attached to the long-term care home that is a 24/7 operation, and it's also attached to the hospital which is also a 24/7 operation, the access in and out of the building, where the washrooms are [have all been considered]; there's many reasons why that area has not been deemed appropriate. We looked at emergency vehicles coming and going throughout the night, [which was] another consideration. So, those are the reasons why that

meeting space in particular has not been deemed appropriate for some sort of warming centre or emergency room solution. Edgar: And I can just let you know that the Community Trust does not have the capacity to do it [run a warming centre]? Question: Why? Edgar: I can't go into detail on that, but there is communication coming from the Trust that you'll just have to wait for. Jenkins: What about just letting us rent the facility [at the Community Trust]? Edgar: It's worth asking, it's worth going there and checking out the place. Connor, you would be more than welcome to go there and so would you Paul. There is the possibility of another place [to have the warming centre] but that will come eventually. Question: What's the expectation or hope for applying for funding or organizing something for the immediate crisis that we're in right now? Dorey: In terms of the warming centre, that emergency response as we go into the cold months, that's funding that doesn't need to be applied for as it is budgeted for by Hastings County through the Homelessness Prevention Funding that comes from the province. The funding is there to support a warming centre in this area. It just comes down to finding the space. We have a portable trailer that might be an option, but once again the land needs to be available to put this trailer on [along with] the services that will have to be accessed. The funding in terms of an application is not the concern, the concern is finding a location, a structure, a facility. Question: Do other levels of government provide funding for broader spectrum support for the homeless? Jenkins: They have programs for different types of things, housing, etcetera. I haven't seen one for shelters. The Town recently applied for funding for a social housing project, which we want to see get off the ground and we have the land. Every time funding becomes available there's a competition to get the dollars and this last program we applied for there were 7,000 applicants. I'm not sure how many actually received the money, I've heard 40 or 50, but who knows what it is. I'm not aware of any funding for an ongoing shelter. Question: Are people allowed to sleep in a warming centre? Shaffer: At the warming centre, they are not permitted to sleep, however they are allowed to rest and if they fall asleep are you going to go and wake them up and tell them that they're not allowed to sleep? No, because they have nowhere to be able to do that. Question: Why aren't they allowed to sleep there since a warming centre is held overnight? Shaffer: It comes down to regulations. If you sleep there it's a shelter, but if you are there to get warm, it's a warming centre. Dorey: It's a matter of fire regulations, personal privacy, and other considerations. I'm not an expert in the differences between setting up a warming centre versus a shelter. Question: [to Mayor Jenkins] Who in our community is going to take the lead on setting up a shelter? Do we need a committee? Are you going to mandate it? Is the County going to do it? Jenkins: It comes down to the funding that is available to us through the province for various programs as passed down through the county. There's been a couple of different working groups for this, but it comes down to finding land and a location. Dorey: There is a 12-hour seven-day-a-week overnight shelter that runs down in Belleville and how that shelter came to life was it was community led. An agency built the business plan, found the property and then went to the external funding sources, including the County and the City of Belleville. That is a recent example of a project that was community led. McFadden: I have been doing more research in other communities this past summer, rural communities across Ontario. It's very expensive to put together a shelter and it's prohibitive for small communities, so what they have been doing is using existing motels. Sometimes they lease an entire motel and they are staffed 24/7 with at least two service providers and is often done in collaboration with other agencies. It might be something that could be used as an alternative to a traditional shelter. Question: I worked in Toronto in something called the Out of the Cold program. A lot of churches took part in this program to help house and feed people. I wonder if we can get back to something simple like having homeless people stay in Churches [since the rules for warming centres and shelters don't seem to be working]? Edgar: I'm going to speak to this a little bit. I invited people from all the Churches I could think of from North Hastings. I would hope that churches can come together and do something like I just heard. St. Paul's has done a lot and I think it's time for all churches to come together. If you are part of a church and doing God's work please give your name, phone number, and email address to Lori Bird or Larry Edgar. Let's make this happen, let's not have anybody die this winter or get cold or starve to death. It's obvious to me that there's no one from the government [who is going to be able to solve this] Dorey and Jenkins are trying their best, but they are limited. The province isn't willing to give us money we have to do it as a community and come together. Question: [For Mayor Jenkins] The Town of Bancroft rents land for their purposes and for their work stuff. How'd you do that? How'd you get that land? Can we follow that process? Jenkins: It's long, it's painful and it's bureaucratic. Councillor Tracy McGibbon has been working on finding provincial land since June and they do have land in Bancroft, but we have not received an answer back as of yet. Question: Since the housing project that is planned for behind McCaskies cannot go ahead this year can the portable warming centre go there? Dorey: The structure is not cheap to move [which requires a piece of land that can be used for three years] and when we talk about those financial pressures, we need to be aware of what those costs are. Whatever site is looked at to see if it is appropriate, whether it's generators that are used to power it, those are the things that have to be worked through. It all comes down to the ability for it to work on a logistics side and on a funding side. All the sites that have been investigated over the past three years, of which Hastings County has been heavily involved, examine feasibility and the ability to provide the services including hydro. Question: How do we get the businesses in this area involved? How are we getting them to help

donate and offer their lands? [How do we get the local grocery stores to] offer the groceries they throw out at the end of the night? How do we get the restaurants to donate the food they cannot sell? How do we get them to give their food? How do we get our neighbours to give their hearts? How do we get those business in town to want to help the situation? Because we all know they are not being helped by the situation as it stands. Everyone in this community is worth everyone's time. How do we get businesses to help just as much as we are?