

Increase possible for water, sewer

By Nate Smelle

Bancroft's community safety and well-being committee met on Dec. 20 to discuss the impact of the 53 per cent increase to water and wastewater rates that kicked in at the start of 2017 and whether to impose another five per cent increase in 2018.

CAO Hazel Lambe indicated that three families had had their water shut off in 2017 for not paying their bills. Since these disconnections, she said two of the three have had their water turned back on and the other individual has since moved out of the space they had previously been renting. Lambe said the town gives residents ample notice – four months – before they shut off water. For these reasons, she said she does not believe that the increase in water and wastewater rates in 2017 caused a crisis for the community.

Program co-ordinator with the North Hastings Community Trust, Jane Kali disagrees. She explained to the committee that through her work at the Trust, she has seen firsthand how the rates have exacerbated poverty throughout North Hastings.

Each day, Kali said she receives anywhere from five to 15 calls from people in Bancroft who are struggling with putting food on their tables and paying their utility bills. Many of these people are now talking about moving out of the community, she said, because they cannot afford to eat, heat, drink water or flush their toilets. Instead of just relying on statistics to decide whether there is a crisis, Kali said the town needs to reach out to the community and start listening to the human side of this story.

‘I hear you saying this is not a crisis on paper, but when you hear the stories from the people in the community who have no food because they paid the water bill, that's a crisis,’ Kali said.

‘When you hear the story of the single mom that went without water for three weeks and couldn't flush her toilet, that's a crisis.’

‘People in our community are going hungry because of the utility rates, and that's a crisis.’

Providing temporary assistance for those living in poverty is absolutely necessary, however, Kali doesn't see such short-term solutions as addressing the root of the problem. She said agencies like the Trust simply do not have the capacity to waste time, money and resources continuously picking up the pieces of broken systems.

Before the town considers raising the water and wastewater rates by another five per cent in 2018, Kali said it needs to look at the systemic influences that are amplifying poverty and contributing to the crisis.

Recognizing how many people are already suffering from the high rates, she doesn't understand how raising them again this year will improve people's quality of life in Bancroft.

‘I think we absolutely need to look at ways to roll back the rates,’ said Kali. ‘This is going to snowball, and we can't continue to do this. We can't continue to make people jump through more hoops just to meet their basic needs. It's affecting people's physical and mental health, and it is traumatizing.’

Bringing up how the Town of Bancroft is legislated for full cost recovery from its water and wastewater system, Mayor Paul Jenkins said the money to pay for the system needs to come from somewhere. Because some people in the community can afford another increase to their utility bill, he said he believes that lowering the rates for everyone would be an inefficient allocation of resources.

‘I'm not saying that that's ideal – I'm just saying that's how it's set up,’ said Jenkins. ‘If [the money to pay for the system] doesn't come from there, it has to come from here – and here is taxation. We are already contributing \$300,000 from general taxation, which has never been done before. There was a lot of unhappy people in the community because they weren't on water and sewer and now they are contributing, so it's a two-sided teeter-totter here. This is a no-win situation.’

This poses a challenge for the municipality, Lambe said, because the town doesn't have the mandate, nor the resources to gather information from people in the community to find out who can afford to pay. This makes it difficult for the municipality to measure affordability in the community, she explained.

‘We don't know who is capable of paying and who isn't,’ she said. ‘The issue is much greater than the water and wastewater accounts – it's about income. How we can support income and know that we're doing a good job, when we don't have that ability. We have to take care of the interests of the town as a whole and rely on social programs and other services who have those abilities to get that information and make the determination regarding who needs additional assistance.’

‘We do know that we have one of the lowest median incomes in the county, and that's a fact,’ added Jenkins.

Sharing his opinion from the audience, Councillor Barry McGibbon didn't see the low median income in the area as contributing to the poverty in North Hastings. He said he believes the best way to fix poverty is to teach people how to budget their money.

‘My parents have never made anything more than \$13 an hour,’ said McGibbon. ‘They bought and paid for their home, and never had a mortgage, and they have a lot of money put away in RRSPs. We never had anything extra and special at home, but we had our needs met. You know what, it made me a better person for that, because I didn't live in a fantasy land. I think that's the problem, a lot

of people are living in a fantasy land, and when they hit reality they don't know how to handle it.?

Pointing out that many people on social assistance programs like the Ontario Disability Support Program and Ontario Works have a monthly income of \$750 ? and that the average rent in Bancroft is more than this ? chair of the water and wastewater committee Councillor Bill Kilpatrick said it will take more than budgeting lessons to solve poverty in North Hastings. According to Kilpatrick, finding a solution to the crisis will require long-term planning developed in collaboration between all three levels of government and the community. In the short-term, he said there are steps the town can take to alleviate the pressures of poverty associated with the high water and wastewater rates in Bancroft. To start, Kilpatrick suggested waiving the water connection fee of \$250, and cutting the interest rate on overdue bills from 18 per cent to nine per cent for people on social assistance.

?What I seem to be hearing is that there is nothing we can do at our level, but there are things that we can do at our level,? said Kilpatrick. ?I have heard of people had to take loans out just to pay their bills ? that is not an effective way of helping, this just going to bury people further and further. If we're going to look at long-term solutions we have to look at what is within our own power to do, and it is in our power to change our bylaws.?

Director of community and human services at Hastings County Erin Rivers travelled to Bancroft early Wednesday morning to participate in the meeting. She has observed that often when people call for assistance from the county it is after they have already had their services cut off. Over the past year, Rivers said the county has provided assistance for several people in financial dire straits from the Bancroft area. She encourages residents having difficulty making ends meet to contact Hastings County's intake access centre by calling [1-866-414-0300](tel:1-866-414-0300).