

Is Hastings Highlands gouging ratepayers?

To the Editor,

Municipal councils do not usually cite "judiciary responsibility" to impose a more than three-fold price increase on the purchase of their lakeshore land especially when the abutting owner, as the only buyer, also bears the total survey and legal costs to acquire a deed for the land normally a cost to the seller.

This is not a normal real-estate transaction. Market value is not a mitigating factor since lakeshore land only has one buyer. That is the abutting landowner.

In my tenure on council, it was only decided to sell the lakeshore at all when it was discovered that many ratepayers could not sell their property because of encroachment of buildings, including homes built within the lakeshore road allowance. The price of \$3 per foot was set with the clear understanding that the price should remain constant in fairness to all ratepayers who may need to purchase the lakeshore in the future in order to sell their property.

As the largest municipality in Hastings County, Hastings Highlands also has the most lakes in the county therefore the most lakeshore land to sell. Most municipalities realize that a steady unimpeded turnover in land sales adds to the prosperity of a township.

Most landowners who knew, or felt they needed to purchase their lakefront, have already done so. That leaves those who can't afford to purchase; or ratepayers with minimal lake-frontage who have no need to purchase; and those not yet aware of the possible need to purchase in the future.

By raising the price substantially now for all remaining lakefront owners, council imposes a triple whammy on these selected ratepayers forcing them also to pay the dramatic increase in survey and legal costs to acquire the township land which council cannot sell to anyone else. Far from "judiciary responsibility," this is tantamount to a "hold-up" without the gun.

Moreover, the motion passed in a close vote of four to three targets specific ratepayers, forcing them to purchase township land if or when they need to sell their property. Obviously, the four, including the mayor who voted for this action, have not considered the consequences.

Meanwhile, whether a landowner buys the lakeshore or not, he still pays higher taxes for having lakefront access. MPAC makes a clear distinction in the assessed value of residential property: waterfront residential is classed separately at a higher assessed value than ordinary residential. Waterfront residential owners with comparable homes pay substantially higher taxes than other residential owners not on water.

Thus, HH still receives higher taxes on lakefront property whether they sell the lakeshore or not. Where else would they get such a sweet deal? They already collect taxes on their own land. Now they choose to arbitrarily raise the selling price to artificially inflate the lakeshore value which by itself has no market value, except to the abutting owner who may now be forced to buy it in order to sell his property.

This amounts to gouging a majority of ratepayers: arbitrarily raising market value can raise the MPAC assessment value on all waterfront residential property, in turn causing a tax increase for all waterfront residential owners apart from any future tax increase imposed by council.

Raising the sale price of lakeshore land today provides no incentive to those who don't need to buy it. That only leaves the ratepayers who can't sell their property, without purchasing the lakeshore at an exorbitant price forced to buy township land. This amounts to discrimination against those who did not purchase earlier. Ethically, this scenario does not paint a pretty picture of this council.

A wiser council might offer the lakeshore at a "fire-sale" price just to get rid of the current liability for ratepayers. Currently HH is responsible for anyone injured on their lakeshore land. Think about it: council members refer to "judiciary responsibility" as reason for raising the price of the lakeshore. They may need reminding -in the end it is ratepayers who pay the bills for thoughtless decisions.

An easy turn-over of property's is not only beneficial to the municipality's ratepayers it brings prosperity to HH in raising the tax base. Council was elected to serve ratepayers, and it has a "judiciary responsibility" not to put obstacles in the way of those trying to sell their own lakefront homes.

As Fagan sang in the musical *Oliver*, "I think you better think this out again!"

Lorraine Fell