

## Mayor provides insight into year ahead for Bancroft



By Nate Smelle

Upon opening the inaugural Bancroft council meeting of 2024 with a Land Acknowledgement, Mayor Paul Jenkins addressed the state of the community heading into the new year. Noting that the start of the new year presented an opportunity to look back on the outgoing year, as well as look forward, he first reflected on the "big picture" for 2023. Throughout the past year, Jenkins said the Town of Bancroft "continued the trend of improving a good financial position; debt levels continued to decline; and, reserves are moving in a positive direction." Adequate reserves are important to properly plan for future needs," the Mayor added, "as well as to fund unexpected events such as the emergency dam repair that occurred this past year." Jenkins also highlighted another pair of major town projects completed on schedule last year: the new fitness centre, also known as the LEAF Centre, and the downtown road construction on Hastings Street North. Although the number of new housing developments in Bancroft were "subdued" over the past 12 months, he said the town expected a slower rate of growth in 2023, due to high interest rates and construction costs. Providing insight into the forecast for economic development in Bancroft in 2024, Jenkins said, "Looking forward, projections for economic activity and construction varied widely, but we do anticipate a modest positive increase. The first of the three apartment buildings at the former public school site will be completed this spring; with construction on building two currently underway. Construction has also commenced on the expansion of the I.D.A , with several other development proposals waiting in the wings." According to Jenkins, the town is awaiting the outcome of a grant application to the Federal Housing Accelerator Fund to determine the final configuration of the North Hastings Inspiration Place; another important local development, which will include the new library, community hub, and housing complex. Once this configuration is complete later this year, he said they plan to commence with construction. With the Town of Bancroft's budget process already underway, Jenkins said they expect to face cost pressures from many areas, including: insurance, policing, and general material costs. To keep up with these pressures, he indicated that they are looking at different ways to operate the municipality more efficiently. Now having been one year since assuming responsibility for the North Hastings Community Centre from the previous arena commission, Jenkins said the town is in the process of gathering data on costs and usage by residents of all surrounding municipalities, in order to assess the future viability of the ice rink. He also indicated that another investigation is underway regarding the collection and operation of Bancroft's solid waste facility. In an effort to improve efficiency and reduce future capital costs for the municipality, he said they anticipate a change in the frequency and timing of waste collection. "Plans to increase waste diversion (recycling) are currently in flux with the new Blue Box Program that will remove responsibility from the municipality and eliminate current collection practices for businesses and institutions," Jenkins said. "Details are scant and in many ways the program appears counterintuitive to increasing recycling results in our municipality." Declaring that "environmental stewardship is a priority of the town," Jenkins acknowledged that Bancroft looks "to be a leader in a low carbon future." As part of the municipality's plan to make environmental stewardship a priority, he said the

town's recently acquired community improvement plan will be reconfigured to recognize development that exceeds current building standards, and promotes the reduction of fossil fuel abuse. To highlight the ever-increasing importance and urgency of the homelessness crisis in Bancroft, Jenkins said he decided to address it last. I have left mention of the homelessness situation to the end, because we need to draw constant attention and pressure on the upper levels of government," stated Jenkins. "The situation is not going away, but potentially growing with the dramatic rise in the cost of living and income disparity. The town receives no direct funding but continues to incur a high cost in navigating a very inadequate and underfunded system. The recent warming room announcements are only a band-aid and we call on the province and federal government to come up with meaningful programs to end homelessness as they have often promised!?"