

MP seeks community input for budget

By Tony Pearson

Newly elected Member of Parliament Mike Bossio has hit the ground running in the new year.

A directive from the Minister of Finance, Bill Morneau, told MPs to gather input from the constituencies on a number of questions, including the best ways to produce economic growth, infrastructure renewal, environmental protection, and support for the middle class.

To that end, Bossio went on a blitz last week, meeting with town council, business, and social agency reps.

After Tuesday evening meetings in Dungannon, he reported to Bancroft This Week that he was asked a lot about infrastructure ? not just roads and bridges but also digital infrastructure: the availability of high-speed Internet connections. In addition, questions were posed about the provision of child care, long-term care for the elderly, and publicly accessible transport services. The improvement of the Bancroft Airport also came up.

Bossio was again "on stage" Wednesday morning at a meeting of the Faraday town council.

He opened by noting that he was in the process of setting up a national and Ontario "rural caucus" among Liberal MPs, to lobby the government on issues of concern to small municipalities. In particular, he hoped to make government officials aware that the towns of North Hastings didn't have the resources of, say, Kingston, notably when it comes to applying for grants.

Faraday Reeve Carl Tinney picked up on the point about the financial suffering of small communities by noting the heavy burden of policing charges, where costs are more related to large cities.

Deputy Reeve Marg Nicholson noted new charges and requirements for telemedicine service, which is essential for small town health teams to access medical specialists but which the province is now threatening.

Nicholson further noted gaps in broadband service in Faraday and Bancroft, which adversely affect the opportunity for local economic development. Reeve Tinney added that in terms of broadband, the Eastern Ontario Regional Network (EORN), which was set up to improve connectivity across the area, seemed to have largely stopped its Hastings County work south of highway 7.

Bossio replied that he was pushing in Ottawa for further development of the eastern Ontario communications network. "Five megs per second isn't fast enough these days," he observed. "If the continental country of Australia can commit to having 100 meg service available to 95 per cent of their population through providers like [NBN](#), surely we can improve."

On the all-pervasive issue of obtaining adequate funding, Councillor Dennis Purcell expressed his concern that Faraday was being penalized for its good financial management. Reeve Tinney further observed that rural townships were victimized by excessive provincial standards designed for large urban areas. "We can put up a really good bridge that would cost, say, \$100,000. But the province wants bridges that cost six or seven times as much." He added: "All of us in the boonies have to make do with high costs and low tax revenue."

Bossio stated that he was lobbying for a commitment to dedicate a set percentage of new infrastructure money to communities under 10,000 to 15,000 people. However, he noted the political problem: "Toronto has one municipal government and one chamber of commerce, so it speaks with a single voice ? and it has more than 40 MPs federally and 40 MPPs provincially. We all need to work together to advocate the cause of rural and small-town Ontario." He added that he was already working with Conservative MPP Todd Smith as part of this effort.

Bossio concluded that a national dialogue had to start on what services needed to be deemed essential for all, regardless of town size, and on how to finance them.

At the end of all the consultations in the region, Bossio admitted that meeting all the needs of the area was a huge task, and required a major education effort to ensure that the federal cabinet was conscious of the special circumstances of smaller towns.

"I may not get everything I hope for ? but it won't be from lack of effort," he asserted. "And I'd rather be a naive optimist and try, than be a cynical pessimist and sit on my hands."

By the way, if anyone wants to pass their input directly to the Ministry of Finance, there's a questionnaire at their website: www.budget.gc.ca/abc 16.