

MPP Ric Bresee has no good news for Hastings Highland's council

By Bill Kilpatrick

At the regular meeting of Hastings Highlands council on July 19 the staff and council hosted the Hastings and Prince Edward Member of Provincial Parliament Ric Bresee who stopped on his way to Ottawa. The meeting was set up to be a conversation on subject matters that concern Hastings Highlands according to the agenda. Prior to the meeting Bresee was given five questions from council on subjects that ranged from the repairs and maintenance to Hwy 62, fire service costs, and amalgamation. Bresee did not say exactly what the questions were, but instead he prepared a presentation on the issues that he believed summarized and addressed the five questions. Bresee began by pointing out that his office received all of council's questions and that his staff did some research and he would be providing some of those answers, but he also wanted to emphasize that he was there to listen about the challenges that the municipality was facing regardless of whether or not it involved the province.

The first issue that Bresee spoke about was the uploading of maintenance and repairs costs for Hwy 62. Bresee said that he brought those concerns to the Minister of Transportation, Caroline Mulroney, and asked if there was a possibility of the province uploading the costs for maintenance and repairs. "The answer I got," said Bresee, "was very blunt: the province is not uploading any highways right now. Period, end of statement." Bresee said that the province has a moratorium on uploading right now adding, "I know that's not the answer that you want, but I want to be open and honest about the answers that I'm getting."

Bresee then spoke about how the Ministry of Transportation uploaded the cost of winter maintenance back to the province for a highway just south of Hwy 401, but pointed out that winter maintenance was not the main issue for Hwy 62 but instead that "long term maintenance is the issue." Bresee went on to outline the priorities for Hwy 62 such as, "Getting that road up to 'highway standards' so that it will be 'safe for everyone,'" but pointed out that to bring the highway up to the proper standard requires, "a huge capital outlay," adding that, "I recognize the size of your budgets, and honestly, [the long term maintenance of highway] 62 is beyond your budget ability. I know that. You know that. The minister knows that. But they are not entertaining an upload [of the highway]." Bresee said that there will be further conversations surrounding this issue and that he will push for a lift to the moratorium, but that he "doesn't have a lot of promise on that side right now," adding "I don't have good news for you right now, but I will continue to work with you and your staff at moving that bar, but I don't have a window on when." Bresee said that he would work with the municipality to apply for grants and press the Minister of Infrastructure, Kinga Surma, to release some of the funds for highway repair and maintenance. Bresee also spoke about possible infrastructure funding from the Investing in Canada Infrastructure Plan, but pointed out that a bilateral agreement with the federal government has yet to be finalized.

Bresee then addressed the issue of the recruitment of volunteer firefighters along with the ongoing cost of training and equipment on municipalities. Bresee sees part of the problem of recruitment with how society has changed specifically for parents between 35-45 years of age who often have their children involved in many different after school activities and between those activities and their employment they have no time to volunteer. Bresee also spoke about how shift work has changed arguing that people are no longer available to volunteer through the day and are often working further and further away from their community which makes them unavailable to volunteer in their own community.

Firefighter Certification, training and testing was another issue that Bresee sees as a barrier to the recruitment of volunteer firefighters stating, "When we add another layer of educational requirements, another layer of training, we are adding to the difficulty of finding those recruits who are able to provide that commitment." Bresee also pointed out that every new layer of training and education also adds to the costs that must be borne by the municipality. He said that he has taken this issue directly to the Solicitor General, Michael Kerzner, and that he will be continuing to meet and talk with him about this issue. Bresee then outlined some of the cost saving ideas that have been suggested to him by other municipal fire services. Bresee is hoping to reduce training and testing costs by getting an unnamed fire training service accredited by the Solicitor General so that new recruits can get both the training and the testing done in the same place. The unnamed fire training service that Bresee spoke of also offers the testing for free. Right now, as Bresee explained, many firefighters have to pay for training at one facility and then pay for the testing at another facility. His proposal, if accepted, would mean that municipalities will only have to pay for the training and not the testing

at the end.

Bresee also wants to bring the idea of refurbishing older fire trucks instead of just selling them off for junk. Currently, trucks used by a fire service must be replaced after 20 years of service, regardless of the condition of the vehicle. These trucks, as Bresee explains, often cost hundreds of thousands of dollars to replace and the older vehicles are often sold for scrap or sent to "third world" countries. Bresee would like to see those older vehicles be refurbished and certified so they can continue to be used. Bresee recognizes that the streamlining of training and testing will result in only minor savings for municipalities, but he is hoping that the certification and refurbishment of older trucks will provide much larger savings for cash-strapped municipalities.

At this point Bresee ended his presentation and opened it up to questions from the council. Mayor Tony Fitzgerald asked if there was a possibility that the province would intervene and create regulations for short-term rentals, because, as Fitzgerald argues, "It's a lot for municipalities to regulate this kind of thing on our own." Bresee did point out that the province has worked with the Ministry of Northern Development, Mines, Natural Resources and Forestry to create regulations for floating accommodations, but Bresee did not know if there were any plans or talk around Queen's Park about the province stepping in and creating regulations for short-term rentals, but that he would look into it. Councillor Tracy Hagar asked if the province had any plans regarding forced amalgamations and Bresee stated unequivocally that there were "absolutely none," adding that the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, Steve Clark, stated that, "he would absolutely never force an amalgamation," but prefers that municipalities make that decision amongst themselves and then approach the province if amalgamation is agreed on by both parties.