

Official plan rears its ugly head again in Wollaston

By **Jim Eadie** Special to This Week

Wollaston Township council had good news on at least two fronts at their July 8 regular meeting.

The chief building officer (CBO) report for the month contained very positive development numbers including 37 building permits having been issued or in progress for this year. "That's double the number from the same time in 2013," noted township clerk Jennifer Cohen. "It is short and sweet. We are getting a lot of inquiries, and some people are planning some large projects."

On another note, the rehabilitation of the Lower Faraday Road is proceeding on schedule, and the standard of the work by local contractor Ron Earle Excavating is high, according the road superintendent Kirk McCaw. Reeve Dan McCaw noted that gravel is being obtained from a local quarry, and local workers and contractors are doing most of the work.

Council also discussed the Community Improvement Project which offers matching grants up to \$500 to residents or businesses doing improvement work on property facades along the Hwy 620 corridor in the hamlet of Coe Hill. There is still \$3,700 remaining in the pot of money set aside for this project, and few applications have been received in the recent past.

Residents or businesspersons can make an application to council for grant approval before the work is started. As an additional bonus, council would waive landfill tipping fees for the project, as well as the fee for the building permit.

Council decided to expand the area within the hamlet eligible for the grants to include sections of Wollaston Lake Rd., High St., Spring St., Elm St., and a short section of Lower Faraday Rd. Contact the municipal office for eligibility locations, and conditions. Council then heard from their zoning bylaw consultant, Heather Reilly who has been assisting with development of the municipality's new official plan. This work has been fraught with complexities, as council has rebuffed the provinces guidelines for planning, land use and development. Council is legally required to come up with something that suits the provincial guidelines, and the County of Hastings planning department which operates under the same set of rules and must also approve it. The biggest source of contention is related prohibition of development on private roads and unmaintained road allowances

Deputy Reeve Graham Blair objected to the reference to hunt camps. "Most people come up here to do other things besides shoot," he said. "A person buys five acres, they want to hike around, do bird watching or have a bike trail. Why can't we call it recreational camp on that land?"

McCaw reminded Reilly that North Hastings is not agricultural land, but rural land where people come for recreation. The rules coming from Toronto bear no relevance to rural land uses.

Reilly, caught in a tough place, noted that whatever she produces for the municipality must ultimately conform to the provincial directive.

"It comes down to how we interpret the province's directives," said Blair.

Reilly agreed, noting that when questioned about interpretation, the province has provided no feedback. "You are at the bottom of the food chain on this one," said Reilly.

"They talk to us as if we are an urban municipality, not rural," said Cohen. "At least the 2014 provincial policy statement seems a little more favourable?"

Wollaston Township gathers approximately half of its tax revenues from properties on private roads, illustrating the concern of this and other rural municipalities.

Municipalities are required to hold an open house, followed by a statutory meeting to bring their residents up to date on the proposed official plan when it is ready. Due to the municipal elections this fall, it is not expected the County of Hastings will be presenting their preliminary draft official plan until early the following year. The Wollaston plan will be expected to conform to the county plan.

"Let's get ours out there ahead of them then," said Blair.

"The county plan must conform with the provincial policy statement," said Reilly. "If you don't agree with them, they can appeal it. The issues that you have, you can't do anything about, nor can I."

"Maybe Brian McComb [Hastings County director of planning] can advocate for us if he wishes to do so," said Councillor Maryann Post.

"Brian [McComb] probably realizes that he is beating his head against the wall to get any changes," said Reilly. "It is difficult being a planner in the hinterland does Toronto know what they are saying. They won't tell us much? I don't think they really know."

Reilly will return to council with an updated draft plan for further discussion.