

Open and transparent in Hastings County



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By Nate Smelle

Since sitting in on Limerick Township council's discussion on Feb. 20 regarding Pancontinental Resources and Hastings Highlands Resources McBride mining project, I have been thinking a lot about openness and transparency in municipal government. Unfortunately, the hopefulness that I felt after the meeting was short-lived. Though still inspired by Limerick council's level of open engagement with their constituents, my hope for a growing interest in open and transparent government among elected officials in Hastings County faded when I learned that Bancroft council had stopped one of our newspaper's reporters from recording at their last open meeting.

Why council would not want their public meetings recorded, so that the people of Bancroft ? the voters who elected them ? could have an accurate account of their proceedings remains a mystery. Nevertheless, having reported on several councils throughout the province over the past seven years, I have observed varying degrees of dedication to openness and transparency. From these observations, it is fair to conclude that councils with an authentic interest in engaging with their ratepayers regarding important matters ? whether good or bad ? tend to engage with the public on social media.

For example, Hastings Highlands Mayor Vic Bodnar recently stepped it up a notch in terms of the sharing of information with the launch of his "Mayor's Diary" Facebook page. In the Niagara Region, Pelham town council along with many other municipalities record their meetings and share the videos on YouTube, so that residents who cannot attend the meeting can see what the politicians they elected are up to; and of course, hold them accountable if they are not following through with their campaign promises. While contemplating the reasons why Bancroft council does not want its meetings recorded and shared, I began reading through the communications and social media policies of municipalities in Hastings County to see what is being done to foster, or restrict openness and transparency.

First, upon looking at Bancroft's social media policy, I noticed that it demands council members shall demonstrate a commitment to accountability and transparency with the public, while at the same time upholding ?the decisions of council regardless of personal opinion or beliefs.? Therefore, even if a member of council that you voted for disagrees with the rest of the elected assembly ? say regarding a quarry, mine or another hike to water and wastewater rates ? that council member must remain silent no matter how strongly they believe a decision by the majority will harm the municipality.

With limited opportunities for entertainment on a Monday night in North Hastings, I decided to take a trip south on Hwy 62 to the Township of Stirling-Rawdon to sit in on a discussion by council regarding its social media policy. Although this policy is allegedly committed to fostering open and transparent communication with the community, like Bancroft's policy, upon reading it fully, it

seemed to me to do more to stifle the sharing of information than nurture it. Though its members of council are directed by the policy to "represent the public and consider the well-being and interests of the township," and "ensure the accountability and transparency of the operations of the township," they are also compelled by this same policy "to not use personal social media or email accounts to discuss or disclose information about the township."

Whether looking at Bancroft, Stirling-Rawdon or any other municipality for that matter, the fact is that there is information that council wants to share with the public, and information it would rather keep buried. However, when the only information being shared with the community is that which the municipality is happy to disseminate, then the people are not receiving the information they require to participate in the political process as well-informed citizens and hold their elected officials accountable. For members of council to make informed decisions that serve the best interests of the community, they need to consult with the people they represent in order to discern what those interests are.

By refusing to share information "whether good, bad or ugly" with their constituents they are depriving themselves of the opportunity to attain a more accurate understanding of the issues that matter to people. It is only through effectively engaging with the public that they will be able to serve the community to the best of their ability.

Elected officials who strive for a higher standard in terms of openness and transparency need to be commended for speaking out against repressive communication strategies. These courageous individuals recognize that without openness and transparency there is no accountability. Their refusal to toe the line and maintain a status quo that is failing far too many people and communities in Hastings County and throughout Ontario is a bold step towards true progress that deserves respect.