

Police costs explained

By Tony Pearson

Linda Davis, a contract analyst with the Ontario Provincial Police, came to Bancroft Council last week to outline why and how the fees charged to municipalities for police services have changed. In addition to Bancroft Town Council, Hastings Highlands Mayor Vivian Bloom and CAO Pat Pilgrim, plus Faraday Mayor Carl Tinney and Councillor Anna Wilson, were in attendance as Davis went through the numbers.

Davis explained that the old model put too much of a financial burden on regional 'hubs' like Bancroft, which was paying triple and quadruple the per-household rate of neighbouring townships. The new model, therefore, doesn't increase overall charges for policing, but re-distributes them.

Under the new formula, charges are broken down into 55 per cent for 'base costs' (administration, patrolling, crime prevention), 36 per cent for 'Calls for Service' (when a police officer is dispatched), and eight per cent for 'other' (maintenance, court security). Essentially, base costs are spread evenly across a region, while calls for service are assigned to the municipalities where they actually occurred.

The base costs are \$193 per property. This is above the old rate paid by many towns for the total service. However, it is well below what Bancroft was paying. So under the new system, Bancroft's total per property cost, including 'calls for service' and other fees, is \$466 - well under the \$655 it was paying.

Davis added that to ease the burden, increases (and decreases) are being phased in. At the end of five years, all towns will be at their new per-property rate. In the meantime, Bancroft's per-property police costs remain the highest in Hastings County except for Stirling (which has its own police force - the smallest in Ontario). They are two-thirds higher than the county average.

Needless to say, Bancroft was very pleased with the new formula, although not with the length of time taken to get it down to the new rate. However, other towns, which have seen and will continue to see large annual increases, are less than thrilled with the new formula. Policing cost increases in rural Eastern Ontario translate into property tax increases ranging from 2.9 per cent in Mississippi Mills and 3.7 per cent in Carlow-Mayo to 5.5 per cent in Madawaska Valley and 8.3 per cent in Brudenell-Lyndoch-Raglan.

Policing costs can chew up from a quarter to nearly a third of a town's total expenses.

The Rural Mayors Forum of Eastern Ontario disputes some of the numbers on which the formula is based; they particularly claim that the OPP has added properties to their townships that just don't exist. But they also claim overall fiscal exhaustion; a letter sent to the Ministry of Community Safety states bluntly: 'Our property taxpayers are tapped out. They are telling us loud and clear that they cannot afford property tax increases that are significantly above the rate of inflation.'

After last week's presentation, Hastings Highlands Mayor Bloom commented: 'I believe all neighbouring municipalities agreed to the unfair costs to Bancroft residents. In listening the other day, I did not hear where this has been done. Instead, what most of us feel is that the Province used the opening up of the Act to further download more policing costs on all areas serviced through the OPP.'

Meanwhile, Bancroft is blunt. A recent council resolution states that over a five year period, it paid more than a million dollars more than it should have, and therefore the Ministry should stick to the new cost model, which it deems 'fair and equitable'.

So undoubtedly the battles over what towns should pay the OPP will continue.