

Policing costs: the debate continues

By Sarah Vance

The annual cost of policing by the OPP, which is showing no signs of de-escalation, is stretching the resources of many Ontario communities. They feel themselves at the mercy of external forces and defenceless when it comes to stopping tax increases. In fact, they are not alone in feeling helpless. Ratepayers are finally beginning to understand the policing formula. A major achievement has been that shareholders are wrapping their head around the issue of public safety and policing costs, said political scientist Dr. Christian Leuprecht, in an interview with Bancroft This Week.

But citing unsustainable costs will not be enough to effect the change sought by municipalities.

Adjustments to the Police Services Act with a new billing model enacted 18 months ago amidst province-wide calls for action, including a 2012 Auditor General's report have brought unsettling new issues to the foreground.

In Bancroft, where policing costs represent a staggering \$1,284,888 hit to the budget line, the new formula will see a \$100,000 decrease in 2016 charges, providing some relief.

However, neighbouring municipalities like Hastings Highlands and Barry's Bay are seeing costs increasing to the tune of an additional \$200,000 per year.

With policing costs in Haliburton County set to double from \$3 million a few years ago to over \$6 million, CAO Mike Rutter and Reeve Murray Fearrey of Dysart et al have called for an appeal to the Ontario Ombudsman.

The Eastern Ontario Wardens' Caucus (EOWC) and the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO) have weighed in on the issue, identifying policing as a critical budget priority, with serious political action required.

We are having a collaborative look at the delivery model, said Al Spacek, Mayor of Kapuskasing and president of the Federation of Northern Ontario Municipalities (FONOM), who also chaired AMO's Policing Modernization Report.

Dr. Leuprecht identifies that rural communities have unique financial problems. Communities like Bancroft tend to have largely stagnant tax bases, as the towns are largely residential, without significant industrial assets, said Leuprecht. Thus, their revenues aren't growing as fast as new policing fees.

It's a fact compounded by what Renfrew County Warden Peter Emon identifies as jurisdictional problems. Not only are policing costs unnecessarily borne upon the residential tax-base, we are paying to enforce statutes which our municipalities did not enact, said Emon.

We are having real struggles accepting costs where we are footing the bill of federally and provincially-initiated legislation.

This is exacerbated by the fact that police wages are increasing at a rate disproportionately higher than average. Police are amongst the highest-paid service providers in the province, said Spacek, with Emon adding that, municipalities cannot deal with increases borne through labour contract negotiations that we have no part in.

This has left associations like AMO hypothesizing delivery models wherein some tasks normally undertaken by uniformed officers could be delivered by civilians.

We recently had a presentation from a British police force where services look different - from front-line personnel to the office structure, said Emon. He felt that shifting service providers in areas like criminal record checks, transcription, prisoner transport, and internet investigations might ease the cost burden.

As noted before in Bancroft This Week, Bancroft's Community Safety committee is also looking at different models to deal with crisis. The town and the OPP are sitting down with social workers and mental health practitioners to check these out. Obviously, with less than three per cent of police calls involving threats to public safety, there is room to adjust the role of the police.

If all you have is a hammer, then every problem is a nail, said Leuprecht. But is this really how we want to be handling social problems in a democracy?

Other changes are also being proposed, like a change to the 12 hour shift. Some municipalities are also asking for a more demand-driven model for staffing detachments.