

Refugee sponsorship debated at meeting



Rev. Lynn Watson outlines the components of refugee sponsorship at a public meeting at St. Paul's United Church. TONY PEARSON Special to This Week

By Tony Pearson

Many expressed strong support for Bancroft sponsorship of a Syrian refugee family at last Tuesday's meeting at St. Paul's United Church. But some felt the support should be limited to a financial contribution, given the local economy. And although in the minority, there were some NIMBY sentiments expressed (?Not In My Back Yard?).

Rev. Lynn Watson began the discussion with an outline of the process to date, which led her church's board to request a public discussion in order to determine community support. She stated that sponsorship would require raising \$30,000, which would constitute a one-year commitment to a family of four.

She and others noted that in 1979, St. Paul's sponsored four Vietnamese families ? the so-called ?boat people.? These families eventually moved elsewhere. But they all still refer to Bancroft as their ?Canadian home.?

Bancroft Councillor Bill Kilpatrick observed that other eastern Ontario small towns ? Killaloe and Eganville ? had created ?Valley Welcome? and were currently fundraising sponsorship money.

However, others in the audience referred to high unemployment and wondered if Bancroft was the best place for a refugee family to become self-supporting. The suggestion was advanced that Bancroft could best support a family who settles in Belleville or Peterborough.

Another objection was that given the lack of affordable local housing, a subsidized family might generate resentment over their accommodations.

Others acknowledged Bancroft's economic problems, but believed it wasn't a case of ?either/or? but ?both/and? ? for example, working for affordable housing on a broad scale. Many recalled the many instances of generosity displayed by the people of Bancroft throughout the year. Kilpatrick calculated that 290 individuals donating \$2 a week could raise the needed sum to sponsor a family.

There were some worries expressed about bringing in Muslims, either because of a lack of support networks or because it was feared they ?wouldn't blend.? This was countered by those who pointed out Muslim communities in the Barry's Bay area, and observed that Canadian Muslims had in fact integrated well. One speaker noted that the acceptance of Muslim refugees by small-town Ontario gives the lie to Jihadist claims of the need for a separate state.

One dissenter expressed the fear that a refugee family would end up on welfare, and cost him tax money. This was countered by former reporter Barry Hendry, who noted that when the community brought the Vietnamese refugee families all quickly become self-supporting, and the children were making significant contributions to the country and its economy.

Councillor Mary Kavanagh observed that except for native Canadians, everyone in this country comes from an immigrant

background.

In the end, Rev. Watson stated that she felt there was majority support at the meeting for sponsorship, although whether here or elsewhere remains an issue. She maintained an optimistic outlook on the outcome; ?we can handle whatever comes our way.?

Note: The original version of this story was altered to reflect the following correction:

Sometimes the need for a correction to a story ? in this case, the Syrian refugee discussion ? yields an even better story. As it turns out, Barry Hendry wasn't actually a member of the 1979 Vietnamese refugee sponsorship committee, although other current Bancroft residents like Wally McColl and Joan Woodcock were. He did, however, have a strong connection. At the time, he was working at Universal Seal in Monteagle. Universal Seal was founded by Flemming Sieler, a brilliant industrial designer who was himself an immigrant to Canada. All four men from the sponsored families were hired to work there, where, Barry reports, they made excellent workers; one even helped make improvements to production processes.

In a follow-up to the Syrian sponsorship question, Rev. Lynn Watson of St. Paul's United Church reports that both the Carlow and Bancroft congregations voted unanimously in favour of proceeding.

In an update about refugees in Bancroft This Week Feb. 26, two names were misspelled. Wally McColl was listed as Wally McCaul and Joan Woodcock as Jeanne. The company, Universal Seal Ltd., was then located in Monteagle of Hastings Highlands. As reported, it is now in Carlow-Mayo.