

## Residents reflect on uncertain future of community centre



By Bill Kilpatrick

After the story that ran in the Jan. 24 edition of The Bancroft Times regarding the uncertain future of the North Hastings Community Centre, a landmark that is now in its 52 year of operation, Bancroft this Week received a call from a concerned citizen and president of the Skating Club, Chris Saylor, regarding his trepidations. After speaking with Saylor Bancroft This Week decided to reach out to other members of the community using social media to hear from them regarding what it would mean to them and their families if the Community Centre had to close. Their responses contained a mix of fond memories, concern for the youth and the future of North Hastings, confusion about how the community centre got to this point and pessimism about the desire of surrounding municipalities to cooperate to resolve it. A brief background

The Oct 4 edition of The Bancroft Times reported the series of events that led to the Town of Bancroft dissolving the Arena Commission and taking over its operation. As was reported in the Oct 4 edition ?The audited financial statements of the Arena Commission showed a \$22,912 deficit in 2019 which increased to \$66,320 in 2020 and by 2021 the annual deficit of the arena had grown to \$102,187.? It was at this time that the Town of Bancroft decided to intervene. The town gave notice to the Arena Commission in May of 2022 of their intent to dissolve the commission, which they did in November of that year. Shortly thereafter Bancroft reached out to surrounding municipalities regarding the operational costs requesting \$10,000 from Faraday and Hastings Highlands and another smaller amount from Carlo Mayo Township. The request for a \$10,000 contribution, which was \$4,000 more than they were giving to the Area Commission, was initially denied by both Hastings Highlands and Faraday, but Carlow Mayo did pay it's requested amount. As a result, Bancroft instituted user fees for residents from Hastings Highlands and Faraday to help cover the operational costs. Hastings Highlands changed their mind in September of 2023 and offered \$6,000 to Bancroft if they would drop the user fees, but Bancroft denied the offer in December last year citing that it was too little to cover the costs. Faraday chose to not make any donation. According to Bancroft Mayor Paul Jenkins the Town of Bancroft is currently gathering data regarding the operational costs, the current deficit, costs of repairs, as well as gathering information regarding municipal users to better understand the financial situation of the community center. The plan, said Jenkins, is to sit down with surrounding municipalities once all the data has been gathered and plan a way forward. On Feb. 2 Jenkins told MyBancroftNow that, ?Municipalities need to come to the table to look at this in detail because the alternative is, we're going to lose the ice surface.? Skating Club president speaks out

Saylor wanted to know if more fundraising could be done to help cover the deficit. ?When I was a teenager that was where you went in the summer time,? said Saylor who recalled, ?There were five to six concerts a summer in there and dances, there were all kinds of dances.? Saylor also mentioned the wrestling match that was held at the community centre a few years back as another possibility for a fundraising idea, pointing out that as a public asset the arena should only be covering its costs and should be thought of like a park in this respect, that it's purpose is not to make money but to break even and to be a draw for people thinking of moving to the area. Saylor, whose children frequented the arena years ago, is

concerned about the impact that the closure would have on the youth in the area. "Our biggest concern is the impact on the children," said Saylor, "Frankly, I think it puts children at risk." Saylor believes that the reduction in youth activities over the last few years, such as dances, extra curricular sports, and even bowling- a pastime that he spoke about with a laugh as he recalled the warped floors of the old bowling alley- combined with the increased availability of drugs and the closing of the arena, for him would be a recipe for disaster. Saylor also raised concerns of how old rivalries could impact any agreement. Saylor cited concerns about personal issues between mayors and councillors that could get in the way of surrounding municipalities cooperating and coming to an agreement for the benefit of all the users of the arena. He stated that it would not be okay that the youth of North Hastings might not be able to use the arena because some of the mayor's are having a "pissing match." "No, that's not how this works," said Saylor imploring all the participating municipalities to come together to "get this done." Saylor says, "From the board's point of view, this is not something that the municipalities should be squabbling about, this needs to be solved," adding that the user groups at the arena would be more than willing to form a fundraising or events committee to help cover some of the costs to ensure that the community centre is fully utilised. "There's not a lot here in Bancroft for our children," said Lori Switzer, "Were trying to keep them off the streets and keep them doing something, it's terrible [that the community centre might close]. If you take that away, where are they going? What are they going to do?" Switzer, who has spent her fair share of time at the arena as a parent whose child spent 14 years in the skating program, is spending even more time there now as a grandparent who is putting her three grandchildren through the program. "I spend three nights a week at the arena," she said, "that's eight hours per week." Between that and her volunteer work as the secretary for the skating club Switzer basically has, as she describes it, a "part-time job on top of her full-time job." For her it's worth the time and energy, pointing out that "you have to offer children opportunities in life," said Switzer, "If you don't give them the opportunity to try and succeed, then what are you giving them?" Sherwood Heines described just such an opportunity telling Bancroft This Week that one of his favorite memories "was playing on the midget all-stars and stepping out onto the ice before a full house for provincial playoffs," pointing out that it felt like he was at Maple Leaf Gardens. Switzer hopes, like Saylor, that all the municipalities will recognize how important the community centre is and work together to keep it open for the youth of North Hastings. "If it closes," lamented Hines, "it will be the end of an era." James Forde is another parent who spends four nights a week at the arena as a coach and parent of two children in minor hockey, Cole who plays in the U11 and Kora who plays in the U13. Forde sent a statement to Bancroft This Week as a hockey parent who is deeply concerned about the fate of the arena. "The closure of the North Hastings Community Centre would be devastating," he wrote, pointing out that "strong minor hockey and skating programs are reasons people move to a community." Forde does not understand how the arena got into this situation since he says "it's virtually impossible to get ice time," adding that, in his opinion, the ice rental cost is the most expensive in our area. Forde feels that there is "no political will" to have the arena exist and believes that if the powers that be allow it to close, "it would just confirm to the people of this town that it is no longer a place to raise a family." Hines said that the North Hastings arena was the centre of his winter life when he was growing up here and it still remains the centre of hundreds of adult's, children's and youth's winter lives as well. As the fate of the Community Centre remains uncertain, there seems to be more questions than answers when it comes to its future. There are a lot of residents who have very fond memories of their time there and want the same experience for their children and grandchildren. Switzer informed Bancroft This Week that the skating club is celebrating its 50th anniversary in 2024 and as a special guest the club has secured Canadian skating legend Elvis Stojko. She described how big of an opportunity it is for the young skaters to see what they could strive to become. But as excited as she is to have Stojko as a guest to celebrate their anniversary, she is filled with mixed emotions and worried that for the youth, this opportunity just might be their last. Bancroft This Week reached out to the president of minor hockey, Marc Gibson, who said the board of directors was preparing a statement for release, but it was not available by press time.