

South Algonquin council hears presentation from SABA]

By Mike Riley

Local Journalism Reporter Initiative

South Algonquin Township council heard a presentation from the South Algonquin Business Alliance at their meeting on April 5. SABA chair Angela Pollak introduced the organization to the new council, led them through SABA's achievements over the past five years and requested \$5,000 in funding from the township to help them continue their work. Council told Pollak they would get back to her soon on the question of funding and their other requests. Pollak comments on this presentation to South Algonquin council.

At the April 5 South Algonquin Township council meeting, Mayor Ethel LaValley introduced Pollak and her delegation to council. Pollak introduced the SABA team of eight members, which included herself, Gabriela Hairabedian, Deborah Alexander, Evelyne Lesage, Loretta Neil, Steve Dunsford, Edward Lentz, and Barney Baker.

Pollak gave a quick summary of the people and groups SABA has partnered with to do the work they do over the years, including the government of Canada, Explorers' Edge Community Futures Development Corporation and over a dozen others, and mentioned that SABA was incorporated in 2021.

"We engage in activities with local, regional, provincial and federal partners (both for profit and not for profit) to increase opportunities in South Algonquin. We build community through investment in ideas, industry and people. We bring community members together to support economic development through an asset-based approach. We strengthen relationships and connect with resources. We advocate, communicate, educate and inform the community. We champion South Algonquin as a great place to live, work and play," she says.

Pollak told council that SABA focuses on the following targets; consolidating tourist messaging, improving shoulder seasons, and raising awareness that South Algonquin is a great place to live, work and play, and worth investing in for new families and entrepreneurs.

Pollak said they recently developed the three pillars of tourism, and they are; trail tourism, mindful nature tourism and dark sky tourism. She also said that they had two supportive pillars of tourism; all season (of which they're working on seven seasons, which are detailed on the SABA website at www.mysouthalgonquin.ca), and always accessible.

SABA recently procured investment to rebuild the old Rail Trail, 45 kilometres along the old OA and PS railway and Hwy 159 south to Spectacle Lake, with a parking lot at the SLBM trailhead. They hope to have everything finished by early this summer, according to Pollak. They've done this with a \$400,000 investment and volunteer time from SABA, and it will be bicycle friendly, multi-use, multi-season and accessible. They also to another \$100,000 to continue the trail south along Hwy 175 to Lake St. Peter. From this rebuild they hope to have improved pride in and public perception of South Algonquin, better access for people with disabilities and more outdoor sport and recreation opportunities.

Pollak said that SABA had achieved a number of firsts; first visit by Minister of Seniors and Accessibility Raymond Cho in 2021 to honour SABA's accessibility achievements, first year to employ six young people under the 2023 Canada Summer Jobs program to give them local work experience, build community and highlight pathways to stay in or come back to South Algonquin after their post secondary education, first to help local businesses access grant funds in excess of \$1.7 million (\$1.375 million in cash grants, plus cash and in-kind copays).

Another first was that in less than five years, at a \$400,000 value to the community with no cost to the township, they have helped 11 businesses, helped create six new businesses, helped retain over 10 local jobs, and helped created over 15 new jobs in the community.

They have started up the local zine One Fine Day, a community-based publication with locally written content, a distribution of over 5,000 copies (they foresee having a distribution of 7,500 to 10,000 copies for this year's zine), and it is preserved in Library and Archives Canada in perpetuity.

Based upon these achievements, Pollak asked council for the following; a donation of \$5,000 or a figure higher or lower at council's discretion, the SABA QR code on local maps and signs, and an in-person seat at the table for discussions that impact local businesses. She said they were also happy with in-kind support like letters of support, partnerships on future projects, material or maintenance, mapping assistance, and other resources as available.

?I will tell you that it's been an enormous amount of time and effort on the part of the volunteers. We've done amazing things with zero resources and all of this during a pandemic as well and we are approaching burnout. We need some extra resources to take the pressure off the same group of people who continually show up and continually push our work forward. We will continue as best we can but we are asking for assistance if it's in council's ability to provide that,? she says.

Pollak concluded her presentation and invited any queries from council. Councillor Shawn Pigeon had a question about a potential \$5,000 contribution from the township and where that money would go specifically. Pollak replied that it would go to basic operating expenses like computer software support, publishing the zine and financial security over the coming year.

Pollak told Bancroft This Week that SABA was delighted to present a delegation to the council of South Algonquin Township on April 5 to introduce their organization to the new council.

?I shared information about our mandate and some of our significant achievements over the last five years. I also made a request for support for economic development in the community, including a donation of \$5,000 to help SABA fund our work and other in-kind resources that would be helpful. In the end, Mayor Ethel LaValley said they would get back to us. We have not heard anything yet specifically related to our request,? she says. ?Conversations are ongoing with our councillors about ways SABA and the township can work together, which we view as a positive outcome.?