

Summit engages local youth



Bancroft delegates Sam Riedl and councillor Bill Kilpatrick, and Hastings Highlands delegates Lexus Scott and mayor Vivian Bloom, with Hastings county warden Rick Phillips at the Summit of Rural Youth last month. Each was hopeful for the future of young people in rural communities.

By Tony Pearson

Young people aren't always asked for their opinions ? sometimes not even by their parents. When the provincial government recently called a Summit of Rural Youth, it was definitely not par for the course.

Following up a series of regional meetings, Minister of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs Jeff Leal invited representatives of rural youth, along with municipal councillors, to a meeting in Stratford at the end of June.

The delegates from Bancroft were Sam Riedl, a member of the NHCS Youth Advisory Group, and councillor Bill Kilpatrick. Hastings Highlands was represented by incoming NHHS student council leader Lexus Scott, and Mayor Vivian Bloom.

According to Riedl, the day was absolutely amazing. To Scott it was a real eye-opening experience. They were both struck by the diversity of young people at the conference who they met at roundtables setup to develop ideas on the keynote topics. The main issue was how young people could be encouraged to remain in and help build the future in their communities.

Riedl and Scott each led one roundtable. They brainstormed training and job development possibilities. They looked at entrepreneurial options in both the profit and not-for-profit sectors, including social entrepreneurship. Entrepreneur consultants helped them analyze a wide range of possibilities, in a sort of Dragons' Den format.

Scott underlined how new enterprises to address unmet community needs could enable college and university graduates to return to their hometowns. Her group identified several potential social connectivity initiatives which could improve the quality of life in the area, such as having young people teach new technology to seniors.

Both Scott and Riedl were enthusiastic about the networking potential which opened up. They said they would stay in touch with other delegates to keep trading ideas and identifying resources.

Another topic was how to engage young people in municipal affairs. Riedl felt that civic leaders needed to show they were listening to youth.

?Young people need to know that if they get involved, they will be taken seriously,? he stated. He wanted to set up forums to allow more local young people a chance to express their opinions.

Scott urged municipal leaders to open their ears to young people by specifically asking youth for input on local issues.

Scott and Riedl both felt this wasn't just an exercise in political public relation.

?It struck me as the real deal,? said Riedl. ?People were trying to get an understanding of the issues which rural youth face.?

Scott added that she felt the minister was looking forward to tangible results emerging from the meeting. The ministry will publish a report on the conference.

To facilitate more discussion, Leal also promised to create a website to assist rural Ontarians in accessing government resources.

?The conversations we have had will help us better address the challenges and needs of rural Ontario and the young people living there,? said Leal.

It was a hopeful exercise for the local representatives.

Asked to summarize the meeting, Scott replied:

?It can't be done. It was a much larger experience than a short quote can convey.?

Bloom expressed her appreciation.

?We have such smart, freethinking, and responsible youth,? said Bloom. ?I was so proud of the two who represented North Hastings. Minister Leal should be commended for organizing such a great coming together, giving youth a chance to voice their wishes for the future of Ontario. I felt it a privilege to be part of this day of sharing and learning.?