

Town reviews 2016, plans for '17

By Tony Pearson

Bancroft's chief officials feel that council and staff accomplished a lot in 2016. They all noted however that the water and wastewater crisis remains to be solved.

Mayor Bernice Jenkins and CAO Hazel Lambe ticked off a number of positive steps, including the new water main down Snow Road. Lambe noted, "The age of the water trunk and unknown condition was a major concern for the town for several years." So obtaining a 90 per cent provincial grant was a major coup. Both also highlighted the completion of the installation of energy-efficient LED street-lighting, and the Earth Science Centre feasibility plan.

Jenkins, Lambe, and Deputy Mayor Paul (no relation) Jenkins all saluted the town's take-over of recycling, which should save Bancroft money, especially in the longer run. In the same category was the purchase of the Railway Station, which will become the new town office building, again at a savings in operating costs.

Community partnerships were saluted, particularly with respect to Bancroft's community safety and well-being plan. The mayor noted that the Bancroft Area Support Team, a multi-agency crisis intervention group, was now operational. The CAO mentioned the North Hastings Children's Services leadership in setting up the Family Support Team.

The deputy mayor and the CAO cited the Eagle's Nest trail development initiative as a successful partnership between the town, the trails committee, the stewardship council, and the Algonquin nation to bring the area's geology, history, and culture together.

Together with the mayor, they look forward to major developments next year.

Mayor Jenkins noted several additional achievements in 2016, including improvements to the arena, the library, and town décor and signage. Lambe remarked on the selection of Bancroft for a pilot project developing an asset management plan which will greatly aid planning and budgeting in future years.

The mayor also underlined Bancroft's selection as one of Canada's 10 friendliest towns.

Of course, the big issue this year was the financial crisis generated by water and wastewater deficits, which culminated in a six per cent increase in water fees and a 100 per cent increase in sewer charges to stop the debt from growing ever larger. Joint committees with citizen participation and reports from auditors and engineers notwithstanding, the main problems "systemic loss of treated water and systemic inflow of outside wastewater" remain puzzles. The CAO hopes that camera work this spring will solve the mysteries, so that repairs can be made.

The deputy mayor has been named council liaison on financial matters, including the water and sewer accounts. In that role, he hopes not only to see improvements in operational efficiency, but exploration of all potential new revenue sources to reduce the accumulated deficit and mitigate further rate increases. Along with the mayor, he hopes that new commercial and residential expansion, like the move of the LCBO to a new building in the north end of town, will improve the town's financial picture. Mayor Jenkins and CAO Lambe also hope that by the end of 2017, Bancroft will have a lower-cost water/wastewater management contract. The mayor's other hopes for this coming year include a new home for the library, which she and the deputy mayor hope will make it a true community centre. Mayor Jenkins and Deputy Mayor Jenkins are also together in their desire to see a new, lower cost home for the works yard, as the town budget is still reeling from the province's \$100,000 rent increase for the current yard.

This year, CAO Lambe will also work to reduce the cost of maintaining the "connecting link" roads (Hwy 28 and Hwy 62) - possibly by having the town works department do the work, rather than contracting it out. In addition, she will look for more areas where services can be shared with other municipalities.

For his part, Deputy Mayor Jenkins has a goal of keeping any municipal tax increase to a minimum. To this end, he wants Bancroft to be as aggressive as possible in marketing the town - "selling" what it has to offer to potential new residents and businesses.

Lambe expressed the same desire, as one of her objectives is to "fill the vacant storefronts in the downtown."

One further objective is to strengthen communications with Bancroft residents, through increased information on major issues and more opportunities for public input. The CAO hopes to produce an annual report with performance standards and measurements. She spoke for the mayor and deputy mayor when she stated: "It is always a pleasure to reach out and communicate with the people of the Town of Bancroft; the council and staff are extremely proud and privileged to serve the community."

The mayor and deputy mayor both wanted to "accentuate the positive" going forward. "With all the initiatives taking place," said Paul Jenkins, "I do believe there are grounds for optimism." Bernice Jenkins summed up her look ahead by noting that while there are many challenges ahead, "it's important for people to stay positive. We have much to celebrate in this 150th anniversary year for Canada. My hope is that 2017 will be a joyful year for Bancroft and its residents."