

Transparency in peril in South Algonquin Township

By Michael Riley

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

Transparency, the hallmark of our democracy, and the accountability and public trust it brings with it, is in peril in South Algonquin Township, as the council there is considering ending online meetings that have been available on YouTube since COVID-19 restrictions made them a necessity. A motion brought forward by one of the councillors to reconsider this approach was unanimously voted on at their Sept. 4 meeting. It will be discussed more fully at their Oct. 2 meeting, and depending on what is decided, could pave the way to do away with online meetings altogether, depending on how council votes. As Swedish philosopher Sissela Bok said over 40 years ago; "I believe that a guarantee of public access to government information is indispensable in the long run for any democratic society. If officials make public only what they want citizens to know, then publicity becomes a sham and accountability meaningless." This is still true today and will always be so. Ending online access to meetings for its citizenry could be an appalling development, which if followed through on, would severely limit transparency and the accountability and public trust that go with it in South Algonquin Township. It would also leave many of the taxpaying citizens, who have a vested interest in what council discusses and votes on, and many who are seniors and may have mobility issues, in the dark about what's going on behind the doors of township council chambers. While council conceded that the transparency that online meetings afforded was a good idea last year, and decided to maintain the status quo, it has now it has been brought back to the table to be reconsidered. The big question is why? Indeed, the optics of council reconsidering this are not good, and would seem to suggest that at least some of the councillors do not want that transparency and the accountability that comes along with having their meetings online. While attending meetings in person is a great idea and indeed Bancroft This Week endeavours to do so whenever possible, some folks are unable to be in person at these meetings for a variety of reasons; work commitments, health reasons, mobility issues, those who are aged and cannot make the trip, and many more reasons. Indeed, Ontario has legislation that accommodations need to be made for those with physical and mental disabilities under the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act, enacted in 2005 and over the past 20 years, organizations in the province have been working to make Ontario more accessible by 2025. One of accessibility standards under the Act being information and communications, so rescinding the option of attending council meetings virtually is a huge step backward, and would be in contravention of this legislation, potentially leading to fines in the thousands of dollars. And I'm sure that South Algonquin does not want to alienate those voters, who no doubt will remember this come election time in 2026. For one Bancroft This Week reporter, the South Algonquin Township council meeting each month is the same day and time as another township's council meeting that they also cover, the latter providing no online option (due to inadequate Internet connectivity), so if that meeting is missed, it is truly missed. It cannot be seen later online on Facebook or YouTube. South Algonquin has no such excuse, as their Internet connectivity is crystal clear as one can see by looking back at their meetings on YouTube over the past several years. Both The Bancroft Times/Bancroft This Week and The Valley Gazette sent a joint letter to the township condemning the possibility they'll end having online meetings available to the public, and the South Algonquin Business Alliance also sent a letter stating the same. These letters can be seen in the Sept. 4 meeting agenda package at www.southalgonquin.ca. There is now a petition on change.org, organized by local resident Andrew Michel, that had garnered 125 signatures as of Sept. 23. The people have spoken, South Algonquin council. Are you listening?

Bancroft This Week urges South Algonquin Township council to hear what their taxpaying residents are saying on this issue, the very people that voted them in. This has attracted a lot of attention and many of your voters are watching how you'll proceed as you discuss it further and how you'll vote on Oct. 2 at your regular council meeting. Please do the right thing and the fair thing so all your constituents can stay informed, and continue offering online meetings going forward. Thank you.