

Water and the power of the people



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By Nate Smelle

THE tone for 2018 was established early last January, when the Gnomes for Social Justice and Equality strolled into the Club 580 during a closed session of Bancroft council on Jan. 9.

Frustrated by the fact council was considering another five per cent increase to wastewater rates after raising them by 53 per cent in 2017, the Gnomes decided that enough was enough and that something needed to be done to ensure that everyone in Bancroft had affordable access to clean water.

To turn up the volume and tune in the clarity of the Gnomes' message, Joyce Dale, an Anishinaabe woman residing in Bancroft, cut off her braid at the meeting. Explaining the significance of her actions, Dale said that when an Anishinaabe person cuts off their hair it is a sign of 'mourning and distress.'

Council, with the exception of former councillor Bill Kilpatrick who remained at the table, refused to listen to what the Gnomes had to say, choosing instead to call the police and wait in the kitchen until they were on the scene. Despite the resounding opposition to another increase made clear by the Gnomes and their supporters on Jan. 9, Bancroft council decided to tack on another five per cent to wastewater rates in March.

As the popular chant goes, 'There ain't no power like the power of the people,' and the power of the people certainly didn't stop there.

In September, hundreds of residents from throughout North Hastings turned out for a pair of public meetings focused on a pair of proposed mining projects, and the potential impact each of them would have on the health of the water supply, as well as the local ecology and economy.

The first of these meetings was held on Sept. 9 at the Limerick Community Centre regarding a mining project proposed by Pancontinental Resources Corporation called the McBride project. Uneasy with the idea of the nickel, copper and cobalt mine operating in an ecologically sensitive area possessing several lakes, ponds, wetlands, streams and rivers, the message from the overwhelming majority of the more than 300 residents who showed up at the meeting was loud and clear 'the McBride project was not welcome.

Wearing a shirt proclaiming the words 'I Stand with Standing Rock,' Chief James Marsden of the Alderville First Nation summed up sentiment in the room, declaring, 'Water is life, and I think that Mother Earth has been stripped enough. That's where we stand.' A few weeks later, a crowd of 200+ showed up at the Faraday Community Centre for another public meeting regarding a quarry being proposed near Bancroft by Freymond Lumber. During the meeting, Dr. Sharon Cowling, an Associate Professor in the Department of Earth Sciences at the University of Toronto raised concerns regarding the blasting which would take place if the quarry was approved. Because the area in the vicinity of the proposed quarry possesses four spring-fed lakes and exhibits a

significant amount of fissures and water spring activity, Cowling said blasting at the base of this watershed could have a devastating impact on the water, human health and in turn the local economy.

With another public meeting regarding the proposed Freymond quarry scheduled to take place at the Faraday Community Centre starting at 11 a.m. on Jan. 9, and the verdict still out on Pancon's McBride project, the fight taken up by hundreds of North Hastings residents last year to defend the water and the community from the potential impact of these projects is far from over.

While our right to clean water is at the heart of each of these ongoing issues, the biggest story of 2018 in my opinion was the direct action taken by the people of North Hastings to protect this right.

Over the course of the next 12 months we shall see whether this people power again becomes the biggest story of 2019.