

Water deposit bills surprise and upset Bancroft tenants

By Bill Kilpatrick

‘How the hell am I going to pay this,’ said Woodview Lane resident Diane Mackinlay when she received a letter from the Town of Bancroft near the end of February demanding that she pay a \$250 deposit for her water and sewer service. Mackinlay who has been a tenant of Woodview Lane since 1997 and is on a pension was confused about why she was getting this invoice for a deposit when her water was hooked up almost 30 years ago, ‘I was just stunned. I don’t understand why they are asking for this,’ said an exasperated Mackinlay, ‘I’ve been paying them for 30 years.’ Mackinlay was not the only person to get the letter from the Town, multiple other tenants who have been residing at Woodview Lane for over 10 years also received the letters. The letter is dated Feb. 12 and begins, ‘Dear Tenant, In the Town of Bancroft, when a tenant sets up a new water and sewer account, it is required of the tenant to pay a \$250 deposit. The deposit is to be kept with the Town of Bancroft as security towards payment for any possible account arrears, damages, or final billings when the tenant moves, or the account is terminated. [?] Since you have not paid your deposit and/or submitted your water and sewer contract, the Town has charged your account the \$250, which is due immediately [?].’ When Mackinlay called the Town of Bancroft to discuss the deposit she was told by the treasurer Wendelin Lonergan, that their records showed her moving into her residence in 2004, but there was one problem, she moved in in 1997, but according to Mackinlay their records did not go back that far, ‘How do you go back 30 years?’ said Mackinlay, ‘Maybe I’ve paid twice and don’t know it.’ Mackinlay did not have any records of her paying the deposit in 1997, but at that time she was on the Ontario Disability Support Program, who generally takes care of deposits along with utility costs. She does not believe that the Ontario government would still have her file since for the last 10 years she has been on a pension. Mackinlay said that she was worried that if she didn’t pay ‘immediately’ like the letter said that the town would shut off her water. She was also concerned about the interest that was going to be charged at 1.25 per cent per month if she refused to pay so she just went to the town and put it on her credit card. She was lucky to get enough income tax back to pay it back immediately, but was also charged an extra fee by the town for using her credit card to pay the deposit. Vicky Anderson, the property support person at Woodview Lane, has heard from multiple residents about the surprise water deposit invoices pointing out that they are, ‘causing everybody to be stressed out and upset and afraid of losing their water.’ Anderson has had to go back through multiple resident’s files trying to find out whether or not they did in fact pay the deposit. Another resident, Roger Sidle, who has been a tenant at Woodview Lane since 2002 is confused about how he did not pay the required deposit since he was also on Ontario Disability when he moved in, ‘All utilities are paid directly by ODSP,’ he told Bancroft This Week. Sidle also pointed out that just to get into a residence at Woodview all tenants have to have water and hydro worked out before they even move in, ‘it’s mandatory,’ said a confused Sidle. Bancroft This Week spoke to Cavelle Sibley, the property manager at Woodview Lane, who confirmed that all tenants must have hydro, water and sewer, and tenant’s insurance in place before they even get the key for the residence. While it is not clear how long the Town of Bancroft has required a water and sewer deposit, another resident, who did not want to be named, said that they had to pay a \$200 deposit back in 1994 when they moved in. Anderson and Sibley receive a bi-monthly update from the Town of Bancroft that shows which residents are in arrears and which have paid a deposit and according to Anderson, there are some residents who have no balance on their account and no deposit, a small balance and no deposit, and a credit on their account and have paid the deposit, but all of them, regardless, received letters. One of those tenants was pensioner Patricia (Patsy) Brethour who has been at Woodview Lane for over 30 years. ‘I’m wondering why they waited so long [to send out the letters]’ said Brethour, ‘I don’t think it’s fair that they hit you all at once. I do pay my bills.’ Brethour said that the extra costs of the water deposit will most likely have to come out of her grocery budget. Bancroft This Week reached out to Lonergan by email who explained that deposits are not required by homeowners, but only tenants. She said that ‘a review was done on all water accounts and invoices were sent to those accounts that did not have a deposit on hand.’ In a follow up email Bancroft This Week inquired as to whether or not this was a direction of council, among other questions, but had received no reply by press time. Bancroft This Week reached out to Bancroft Mayor Paul Jenkins who said that he was not aware of the letters being sent out but that, ‘he would look into it.’ Sharron McCullough, who has been a tenant on Woodview Lane since 2004, is also confused about why the letters are being sent out at this point in time. ‘I don’t consider 20 years later a new account,’ she said referring to the reference to ‘new water and sewer’ accounts in the letter. McCullough said that when she spoke to Lonergan about the deposit, she suggested that perhaps installments might be a better way to help those who have low incomes, ‘would it not be more humane to tag on an extra five or \$10 a month until the deposit is paid?’ stated McCullough. But when that suggestion was put to Lonergan, recalled McCullough, she was adamant that the amount had to be paid in full, ‘she gave

no leeway, and said there were no exceptions. This was a suggestion that was also put to Lonergan by Mackinlay who suggested incremental payments and received the same replay that McCullough received. Bancroft This Week asked Lonergan in an email why this was not being considered as an option for tenants but received no response by press time. McCullough said that she has spoken to no less than seven residents on Woodview Lane, most of the people who have come to me are seniors, said McCullough adding that most of them have no money left at the end of the month. While the residents on Woodview Lane are not the only tenants in the town who have received the water deposit letter, they are the people who are being impacted the most. Linda Lapalme, who has also been on Woodview for over 20 years was furious when she received the letter and went straight to the town offices to inquire about it. She said that despite her anger she paid the deposit, but expressed her unhappiness to Lonergan about the decision to ask for the deposits after such a long time, Why am I being punished for paying my bill early for 20 years? she said. Another long-time resident of Woodview Lane who did not want to be identified, could not remember if their deposit was paid, but expressed anxiety and worry that the credit on their account might get taken away and applied to the deposit. So far, the Town of Bancroft has been tight lipped about the deposit letters, which has led many of the residents on Woodview Lane to speculate that this is nothing more than a money grab. However, as Anderson explained, the town does not lose money from water and sewer arrears from tenants because those delinquent accounts, in the case of Woodview, get charged back to the corporation and then the landlord has to chase them down. This was confirmed by Lonergan who said in an email that, Arrears are handled by sending a letter for payment and if payment is not made it gets put on the tax roll [of the landlord] which avoids water being shut off. The overarching questions that remain to be answered are how did these residents get their water hooked up without a deposit if a deposit is required as the letter states, and why were these allegedly delinquent deposits not identified earlier? Mackinlay pointed out that she had moved three times to different residences on Woodview lane, in 1997, 2006, and 2013, and questioned how the town missed noticing that she allegedly did not have a water deposit when she had to change addresses three times. This was a point that McCullough also raised pointing out that she had to move residences on Woodview in 2009, but was never notified that she allegedly did not have a water deposit on hand with the town. This doesn't make sense to me, said Lapalme, It's not logical, and I'm a very logical person. While some residents paid the deposit out of fear that their water may be shut off and to avoid interest penalties accruing, others, like McCullough, have decided to dig their heels in stating, I don't have \$250. I'm not paying it.