

Wollaston Reeve Blair focuses on economic development

By Jim Eadie

In a new year conversation about his municipality, newly elected Wollaston Township Reeve Graham Blair was pretty clear that in his leadership role, he hopes to move forward prospects for economic development on a number of different levels.

Blair has lived in the township for 35 years working as a residential contractor, and more recently as a realtor with his office on downtown Coe Hill. Prior to being elected reeve, he served two terms as a councillor, and more recently one term as deputy reeve.

He reiterated his election promises to keep meetings orderly and on task, to insure un-inhibited debate, and ensure that delegations to council are fairly and fully heard.

"I hope to encourage council members at the table to feel completely free to express their opinions ... as in fact they are obligated to do," he said. "I will also do my best to effectively lobby the upper levels of government to allow small municipalities like ours to have more autonomy regarding our planning and responsible development."

What is the biggest hurdle over the next four years?

"I have no hesitation, it is economic development. As the rules stand now, we are at our development limit, and that cannot remain the case. The same regulations that apply to urban and near urban centres do not apply here ... and that is not just specific to us, but also other places like Limerick, Tudor and Cashel, and Faraday. The official plan cannot be a one size fits all document."

Blair has just been appointed to the county council planning committee where he says that he will "gently prod" for now.

On the local front, both Blair and Deputy Reeve Marilyn Brickles are attending North Hastings Economic Development Committee meetings, a measure of how important the new council sees this file.

"I think it is important to show interest and participate on a regional basis in economic development plans," said Blair. "We have to be careful how we spend our money from here ... but there is a bigger picture too. We are part of that regional area. Maybe at first glance it looks like we are supporting people in Bancroft, but if there is business development in Bancroft it can also benefit Wollaston Township. In the bigger picture, employees will be attracted to Bancroft, and some of those people will come from Wollaston Township."

Blair also noted that he hopes there will at least be a token council support for public transit options, which in the end will benefit economic activity and attract newcomers to the township.

"At the local level, I am hoping for a reincarnation of some sort of revitalization or economic development committee of Wollaston council," said Blair.

"I think that is important."