

Fix Hydro protest draws residents from across region



Protesters shut down Bancroft's main street Saturday, Sept. 24. Supported by community leaders like Town of Bancroft Councillor Bill Kilpatrick, centre, and North Hastings Community Trust co-ordinator Jane Kali, locals rallied to fix hydro and put food in the budget speaking out against hunger and energy poverty. / SARAH SOBANSKI Staff

By Sarah Sobanski

Community members came together to protest energy and food poverty.

North Hastings Community Trust and the Put Food in the Budget campaign rallied with community members to end poverty in rural Ontario Saturday Sept. 24. In a sea of pointed red hats ? marking them as gnomes against social injustice who can't stand around any longer ? almost 50 people marched down Hastings Street North.

The mission was to stop hydro disconnects, recognize poverty in the area, and alert the powers that be that North Hastings has had enough.

?Real wages have not risen since 1979, nor remotely kept up with rising prices. Social assistance rates went up last year by a measly one per cent, while the price of fresh fruit and vegetables went up seven per cent and hydro went up 16 per cent,? said Town of Bancroft Councillor Bill Kilpatrick when the protest reached its stopping point at Riverside Park. ?Due to these disparities, people in rural Ontario are being forced to make choices that people in one of the richest countries in the world should have to make.?

The protest was the culmination of three public consultations held across North Hastings. People came together in Bancroft, Coe Hill and Maynooth to share their stories and experiences with poverty.

One woman from the consultations spoke to her experiences at the rally. She remembered a man she visited.

?I asked him what he was doing for food, he said that because a partridge hit the window, and a buddy brought him a bag of deer meat, that was how he got through the winter,? she said.

North Hastings Community Trust (NHCT) program co-ordinator Jane Kali called for an end to all hydro disconnects. She said the government systems that provided for the impoverished don't work.

?The systems that are causing poverty have not changed and they aren't changing fast enough to save lives,? said Kali. ?What we heard in our consultations is that people are incredibly resilient, but they're also incredibly tired of having to make uncomfortable choices about what to do. Do you pay your hydro bill or do you put food on your table for you and your family??

She added, ?We want to take this message to the powers that can make changes, who can shift the systems. Our government is responsible for our wellbeing and our quality of life. We need to put pressure on them to care for rural Ontario, we have been neglected.?

Poverty Roundtable Hastings Prince Edward director Christine Durant was among those who assembled. She commended the NHCT for its work and suggested that together they would work to create a centralized voice for change.

?The North Hastings Community Trust is doing really important anti-poverty work and we're the Poverty Roundtable Hastings Prince Edward, so the work that its doing here and the work that we're doing there is much [the same]. We are sharing the same side of the same coin, and we'd like there to be more coins for people to reduce poverty,? said Durant. ?We have the opportunity to create a much more central voice. We're starting off with join the conversation.?

She added, ?Poverty is really about choice and when you don't have choice you find yourself in poverty. The way to go forward is to come together collectively and figure out what to do.?



The idea for gnomes against social injustice was explained at the rally. The Put Food in the Budget campaign's mascots were tired of standing around in their gardens and doing nothing to ensure financial security and justice for all.



North Hastings Community Trust energizes protest attendees calling for an end to poverty and an end to hydro disconnects.



Banners from each consultation, held in Maynooth, Coe Hill and Bancroft, were hung at Riverside Park to give a voice to those who couldn't attend the rally. Members signed with comments against privatization and poverty, and with support for the rally.