

Helping volunteers help

By Tony Pearson

A major Bancroft event is now up in the air. Bancroft's BIA decided at its June 1 meeting to withdraw from future involvement with Wheels, Water and Wings (WWW). At its July meeting, reported to council this month, they recommended that a new "third party" to take it over, and organize other town festive events as well, in the other seasons of the year. Councillor Mary Kavanagh, the town's BIA rep, asked that council discuss how to proceed from here; Mayor Bernice Jenkins promised that it would be on the next meeting agenda.

The BIA suggests that for WWW and other possible events, an event co-ordinator be hired. OK - but that person would need to be able to depend on the help of a large number of dedicated volunteers. Many hours of free labour would be required - as the business people who form the BIA spent on WWW, or Chamber of Commerce helpers spend on the Gemboree. The more events, the more volunteers needed.

That raises the question of how to encourage more folks to volunteer. As it is, many of the town's activities and services are already volunteer run, or depend heavily on volunteers to deliver their programs. To attract even more people to get involved, an examination of incentives and disincentives for volunteers is needed.

A recent study by Volunteer Canada found that the most important incentive for volunteers to get and stay involved was the feeling that they were making a difference - making a contribution to their community. And they want to know that their effort is recognized and appreciated.

This, they reported, didn't have to be done through formal banquets. For younger people, it could be by a letter of recommendation they could append to their resume. For others, it could be some training.

However, for almost everyone, feedback is the critical component: through questions - "How's it going?" "Do you have what you need?" "Can we help you with anything" - and through ongoing expressions of appreciation and support. The volunteers surveyed stated that regular, informal, and personal words of thanks are better than an annual dinner, or a formal motion.

So if the town is going to take on more tasks requiring volunteers, it should first develop some guidelines for volunteer management - particularly how to express its appreciation for the work they are doing.

It should also consider how to create broader partnerships, working together with existing local groups on event planning and implementation. This helps create the sense of involvement that volunteers seek. In addition, the town has areas where it can help organizations - such as identifying grant possibilities, and preparing grant applications.

Bringing volunteers from different groups together on a regular basis creates opportunities for broader networking - a benefit to the volunteers - and perhaps more new partnership projects - a benefit to the town.

There's also the issue of reducing barriers to involvement. Take insurance, for example. Most towns have special coverage for those working on a municipal event under the aegis of the township. However, there are exceptions. If an organization has its volunteers working on a town project - say, WWW, or the Eagles Nest trails - then the town's insurance may not cover them. Then the organization would have to arrange its own coverage. At around \$450 to \$500 for \$5 million worth of coverage (a quote from a local agency which handles non-profits), this might be a minor expense to some. Yet it can be a major expense to an organization which doesn't do extensive fundraising.

Fortunately, there are ways to get around that - such as the town providing training. But caution is the watchword, for there are some snares which can result in large unanticipated costs. One of these is the concept of "joint and several liability." That means that any party found to be at fault, no matter how minimally, can end up footing the whole bill. In lawsuits, municipalities are often sued because if the people who are mainly at fault don't have enough coverage, the town with its deeper pockets (those of its taxpayers) can be forced to make up the shortfall.

Not surprisingly, municipal insurance rates have increased. In an August backgrounder, the Association of Ontario Municipalities (AMO) reports that lately, towns are paying more for insurance than they do for bridges and culverts and conservation. That's why some municipalities no longer allow street hockey or tobogganing on town property.

The provincial government could help by limiting liability to the amount of fault - if you're 10 per cent responsible, you pay no more than 10 per cent of the damages. The province promised to do that a couple of years ago. But under pressure from the personal injury lawyers lobby, they have since reversed themselves. As everyone knows, injury in a public place is one of the main answers to the question- "[what does a personal injury claim involve?](#)" Thus, it gives personal injury lawyers a higher ground for winning the claim.

Still, as the president of AMO has said, "Changes to liability legislation would not cost the province anything, but could lead to

lower insurance premiums and allow more people to enjoy recreational activities in their communities."

It's time for a co-ordinated, pro-active approach to volunteer encouragement ? by the province, the town, and the existing service groups. The winter carnival disappeared some years ago; Bancroft wouldn't want the same fate for WWW.