

Bancroft lobbies at ROMA

By Tony Pearson

Each year, towns send representatives to the annual conference of the Rural Ontario Municipal Association, to talk to provincial ministers, parliamentary secretaries, and senior public servants about how the provincial government can help them more. Of course, very rarely do the towns' questions get a straight-up answer of 'yes,' (though not infrequently, they do get a straight 'no?').

Most of the time, the replies are polite deferrals 'along the lines of thanks; we'll look at that issue. Sometimes there's a promise to get back to the town with an answer 'but 'later' can mean 'never.' For example, Bancroft has consistently raised the astonishing 433 per cent increase in the rental fee for the works yard. Time after time, provincial representatives have expressed shock and promised to get to the bottom of the problem. Bancroft is continuing to pay the additional \$100,000 a year.

However, Mayor Bernice Jenkins believes in the 'erosion' theory of lobbying: keep bringing the issues up, like waves breaking along a shoreline, and sooner or later some resistance will give way. The prime example here is policing costs. For years, Bancroft argued that the fees it paid for OPP service were unreasonable. Eventually, a new funding formula was developed which significantly lowered the town's costs.

This year, Jenkins spoke to four departments. With the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing, she stressed the importance of improving the stock of affordable housing in small town and rural areas. Poverty here can be extensive, although invisible to big-city eyes. She referred particularly to the disproportionate hydro costs in rural areas as a major factor.

She also raised the question of municipal codes of conduct, which she feels need 'teeth' 'penalties and sanctions which can be imposed when the code is broken.

With the people from Infrastructure Ontario, she naturally discussed the works yard. The province is preparing a case for the town buying the facility. She suggested a sale price in the range of a dollar, like a number of other provincial property transfers.

With the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry, the issue was wild parsnips. This innocent-sounding invasive species can have a nasty environmental impact, crowding out native species and reducing the quality of some crops. Of more immediate concern to those who come across it, it can cause severe burns. Its sap releases chemicals that cause human skin to react with sunlight and turn quite nasty. Bancroft asked that more of an effort be made by the province's work crews to control growth along provincial roads. With so much of this quick-spreading plant on highways, municipal control efforts will be futile unless the province also makes an effort.

Jenkins did receive a positive answer from MNRF on a previous request: the Madawaska River Management Plan (which includes the York River) will be reviewed this year. The town would like a more proactive policy on river management to emerge from this review. 'With global warming, spring storm intensity is increasing. The danger of flooding is becoming an annual risk. We would like water levels monitored earlier and necessary action taken more quickly,' said Jenkins.

With the energy ministry, hydro was the obvious issue. Bancroft advocated 'fair costing,' meaning one province-wide rate so that rural areas are not hit with exorbitant charges compared with the cities. Jenkins also recommended more testing of the accuracy of hydro's 'smart meters' and software.

Asked if the ROMA exercise is worthwhile, Jenkins observed: 'If we don't regularly remind the province about the needs of small towns, they may feel free to ignore us. And while we can't directly measure our impact, I remember Wayne Gretsky's advice 'if you don't take the shot, you won't score.'