

Family feuds

By Tony Pearson

Maybe it's something in the water, but Bancroft council seems to be having trouble with its digestion lately. Some councillors don't seem to be able to stomach each other. According to the longest-serving member of council, the frustration is higher than he's ever seen it. The mayor has stated that there is a definite absence of respect among council members ? for each other and for staff. Apparently it isn't just Bancroft. Wollaston's deputy reeve recently resigned when she found the atmosphere too toxic. She too spoke of the need to treat people with respect, and said that she had ?lost her spirit? after becoming the ?topic of public ridicule? for her votes on council.

North of Bancroft, Hastings Highlands has seen some fiery rhetoric at public meetings held on the issue of garbage pick-up and the town budget ? with a lot of it taking a personal note.

In Bancroft, the financial crisis occasioned by the growing sewer deficit has led to a 53 per cent increase in water and sewer rates, and a 100 per cent increase in edginess. Most recently, one councillor moved to waive the normal notice period in order to immediately shut off a public tap. Next, there were social media posts, a lot of honking on Hastings Street, and people in red gnome hats in the council audience.

To some extent, this is the democratic process at work. After all, the days are long gone when the idea of democratic involvement was to vote once every four years. Elected representatives ? be they federal, provincial or municipal ? are expected to interact with their constituents on an on-going basis. Yet for most of last year, the typical audience at a Bancroft council meeting, apart from media and presenters, was zero ? no one at all. Now people are turning out. That can be a positive development.

On the other hand, if ego and ambition take over, personal agendas can begin to dominate ? and personal agendas tend to generate personal animosities, which lead to fractiousness, and attempts to micro-manage town operations. When the personal becomes political, it can lead to public cynicism about the whole political process.

That sort of negativity can spread. People can stop volunteering for local events and causes ? disastrous in small towns, which so heavily rely on volunteers.

At the municipal level, there's no party system to allow collaboration and the unity of a shared cause. While politicians at the federal and provincial levels can always retreat into their party caucuses to express their views and work out their differences among themselves, councillors mostly stand on their own.

Businesses and organizations can hold retreats to develop a common mission and objectives. However, if four councillors get together, it's considered a public meeting, with all the rigmarole that entails. So town councils have to develop cooperation and work out compromise in a public forum. That tests their ability to seek consensus rather than conquest for their point of view.

In an effort to lower the temperature, Wollaston has engaged a mediator to try to bring together the two sides of their council. In Bancroft, the town engaged two consultants to make a presentation on the role of a council member ? their responsibilities and their limits.

The consultants identified the legitimate expectations that the public has of its municipal government ? to deliver basic services effectively and efficiently, to respond to emergencies, to deal with new issues that arise, to ensure transparency and accountability in municipal operations, and to contribute to community pride. A feuding council in which personality trumps everything (pun intended) jeopardizes all these expectations.

A municipality can adopt a code of conduct to govern its members. At the moment, such a code has no teeth ? there are no penalties for breaking it. But it offers guidelines that should be taken to heart. These include open yet civil discussion, an absence of attempts at harassment or intimidation, a setting aside of personal interests, and above all, respect ? for each other, town staff, and the public. Sounds like a plan.

To end on a positive note: debate and difference of opinion aren't bad things, if they lead to collaborative discussion of the overall best interests of the public. Public debate can allow the public a chance to get and feel involved ? if such debate isn't preemptorily cut off. That's why council motions are given two weeks' notice, not rammed through quickly. In a lot of cases, even after notice, council postpones a decision to allow for more public feedback. Sometimes public forums are held to encourage community input ? and that too is positive for public confidence.

In other words, discussion and debate aren't the problem ? families argue all the time. But if in the heat their members don't remember that they are all family, the unit becomes dysfunctional. And if that's bad for a family, it's just as bad for a township.