

Dump draws heated discussion

By Tony Pearson

At the Dungannon Recreation Centre in L'Amble on April 23, a full hall made their feelings clear about a number of issues facing Bancroft – chiefly, that they are strongly opposed to the sale of the Dungannon landfill.

Meeting organizer Wilma Brethour made clear that an important related issue was the perceived lack of communication and openness of the town councillors and staff. Three councillors were present at the meeting.

‘It's time for us to have a say,’ she stated, opening the meeting. ‘Council needs to hear from lots of people if we hope to get a dialogue started.’

Brethour wanted more town commitment to getting the full picture on problems to the public.

‘In the past couple of months, I've spoken to the mayor, the deputy mayor, councillors, the CAO, and the treasurer. Sometimes I've [received] the truth; sometimes I haven't. I've made a presentation to council, and been treated like a second-class citizen. We produced over 500 signatures on a petition not to sell the dump, and over 100 letters. But no member of council actually read the letters and checked the petitions.’

An underlying theme surfaced fairly quickly – the idea that amalgamation of the townships had been a mistake. In particular, many felt that Dungannon's interests were being sacrificed to Bancroft's sewer problems. De-amalgamation was the first recommendation from the audience when asked to make a list of issues to pursue. However, Brethour indicated that restoring the original townships, though supported by many in Dungannon, was extremely unlikely given the attitude of the provincial government.

Open discussion led to other issues and other recommendations. Since the financial crisis brought on by the sewer debacle had led to the suggestion of selling the landfill, people were asked about other means of bringing in or saving money.

Many in the audience felt that the town was overstaffed, with too many idle hours. Brethour also identified potentially excessive costs for a new works yard, and too much money spent on consultants. Policing costs were another issue of concern to many, although Councillor Mary Kavanagh pointed out that Bancroft had fought hard to get a new and more favourable funding formula from the province. Several audience members suggested that additional proposals, like reductions in the number of officers in the detachment, were needed. Kavanagh noted her attempt to get the province to allow municipal lotteries.

At this stage, one possible compromise was identified: opening the landfill's recycling facilities to other municipalities. However, it was noted that a number of towns had already stated that there wasn't enough financial incentive for them to take this path.

The conversation kept returning to the dump. Councillor Bill Kilpatrick was asked why he had opposed the motion not to sell. He replied that because he had seen no evidence one way or another as to the financial wisdom of the sale, he wanted to find out some facts before making a final decision in the best long-term interests of the town. The reply was that regardless of what a consultant's report might find, the residents of Dungannon would remain against the sale. When the people at the meeting were asked if anyone was in favour, no hands were raised.

In the end, a consensus formed around the idea of creating a Dungannon ratepayers' association, and/or setting up a committee to discuss and negotiate further with Bancroft council. This idea was advanced by former mayor Lloyd Churchill, who termed the dump sale ‘a stupid idea,’ but stated that the current council was struggling with tough financial problems, and could use assistance, as well as greater transparency in arriving at its decisions. A number of participants agreed, asking that a public question period become part of each meeting.

After the meeting, Brethour expressed her delight at the large turnout. She said she was optimistic that people would continue to express their views, and hoped council would listen to residents rather than consultants. She stated her support for a committee which would be allowed to talk openly with council about important town issues.

Kavanagh agreed that meetings like this allowed town residents to have their say.

‘All ideas which are viable and doable need consideration.’ She noted, for example, that municipalities are constrained in what they can do by the province and its regulations. She also stated that the sale of the dump needed more study, as there were further financial ramifications, such as liability for county and education taxes on its assessed value.

Kilpatrick expressed his support for keeping the discussion solutions-oriented. He disagreed that decisions should be made without firm evidence. Noting that new creative revenue and savings ideas were badly needed, he felt that equal pressure should be exerted on the provincial and federal governments to assist small towns dealing with serious financial problems.

Churchill felt the meeting demonstrated that residents are interested in dealing with town problems. He said he hoped council would understand how concerned its citizens are. He also felt more facts were needed out in the public domain; ‘Let the people know more about what's going on,’ he stated. ‘The more constituents are fully informed, the better council will function.’

