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Seniors wary of BPL partnering

By Nate Smelle

Members of Bancroft's Seniors Club showed up at the June 13 meeting of council to express their disapproval with the idea of sharing Club 580 with Bancroft Public Library.

In club president Roseann Campbell's presentation to council, she explained how the facility has provided seniors in the community with a place to socialize for the past 43 years. In that time, Campbell claimed BSC has raised more than $322,000 in donations to make improvements to Club 580.

Though BPL would like to see Club 580 transformed into a community hub that would be shared between themselves, the seniors and other clubs in need of a public meeting space, hopes for such a move are fading fast. To keep the facility in the hands of the BSC, Campbell proposed that the club take over the lease from the town as well as the cost of utilities, maintenance, basic interior renovations and repairs.

Following Campbell's presentation, acting Mayor Paul Jenkins told Campbell and BSC members in the audience that the town was in no way trying to exclude the seniors. He assured them that they would be included in the planning process as ideas for the municipally owned space are developed.

?There is no intent for the seniors not to be at this location,? said Jenkins.

While the idea of moving the library was discussed during a recent meeting of the building committee, and that discussion was reported in the local news, Jenkins said by no means was the idea set in stone. Council carried on this conversation after Campbell's presentation, speaking to both the advantages and disadvantages of moving the library to Club 580. On the plus side, the central location of the facility and the fact the building is accessible and wheelchair-friendly. The current location of the library is not accessible to all citizens.

?The accessibility to the library is not adequate for this day and age,? said Councillor Charles Mullett.

Stating that Club 580 would be a perfect location for a community hub that included the library, Mullett explained that ultimately one of the main reasons Club 580 was being considered as a new home for the library is that the town is trying to make the best use of all its municipal buildings.

While there are several advantages to moving the library to Club 580 to establish a community hub, council also pointed out that the facility is not entirely suitable for a library. For instance, the floor of the club is not built to carry the weight of the books. According to Mullett, a library's floor must be built to carry 150 pounds per square foot. To remedy this, council suggested that the floor could be ripped out and reinforced to carry the weight. They also proposed constructing an addition to Club 580 to house the library. This option would allow for BSC to continue using Club 580 while creating a fully accessible public library and community hub.

CEO and head librarian Chris Stephenson issued a statement declaring that ?the Bancroft Public Library staff and board are disappointed to hear about talks ending with regards to relocating the library to Club 580. Dozens of hours of groundwork and presentation planning have been spent informing council, community groups, and residents about the benefits of community hub development.?

For the past year, Stephenson said they have promoted the idea of sharing services and space under one roof in a central location, and pooling resources at a time when costs are going up for all organizations. Indicating that the public appears supportive of the concept, and several local groups have expressed an interest in collaborating with the library to make this vision a reality, he said the library has already had donors come forward privately to offer financial backing towards a sensible plan.

Furthermore, Stephenson pointed out that the library's staff and board of directors field questions almost on a daily basis about a potential move to a safe, appropriate, and physically accessible space. He said that the discussion about moving the library to a building which can accommodate strollers, walkers, and wheelchairs has been going on for several years. Considering 65 per cent of the patrons who frequent the public library are local seniors, and many struggle to use the current facility due to the split-level entrance and stairs, Stephenson viewed a partnership with BSC as a prudent idea for all parties.

In April 2016, he said Mullett met with the library board to discuss the high school, the old town offices and Club 580 as potential locations. From these discussions, he said it was generally perceived that Club 580 would be the most satisfactory destination for a community hub/library. Despite the consensus at these meetings, Stephenson said he received an email from the town at the beginning of 2017 requesting the library to not communicate with Club 580 members directly. As a result, he said explaining the library's vision for creating a partnership with the seniors group became increasingly difficult.

After the council meeting on Tuesday, Stephenson said he was informed by the Town of Bancroft's building committee that they are open to discussing an addition being built on to the older structure of Club 580 to accommodate a new library. While there may be

political will to see this progress, he said financial support for such an initiative is another matter. Although BPL raised almost $600 this weekend at their annual Big Book Sale; and other fundraisers are planned for next month, he believes financing a new library without investment from the town is not realistic.

?So far, I've identified only one other public library in Southern Ontario with accessibility issues ? the one in Meaford has limited access to two areas of their building,? said Stephenson.

?We're hopeful that Bancroft can solve this accessibility problem with a community approach, but for now, we're back to the drawing board.?