

Mayor resigns with heavy heart

By Sarah Sobanski

Almost 15 years of municipal service were brought to a close Sept. 26 as Town of Bancroft Mayor Bernice Jenkins tendered her resignation from council, effective Nov. 30.

While Jenkins's health has improved since she began her medical leave in the spring, she told Bancroft This Week her doctor has recommended she not return. She invited the paper to her home to speak about her resignation.

"I'm saying that I am done on council, and that I'm resigning as mayor, but I'm not saying goodbye to the community. I've lived here since 1946. I plan to live here until such time as I move across the yard to the graveyard," Jenkins said as she rocked back in an oversized recliner. "I'll be here a long time."

The smell of German red cabbage she'd been cooking for Bancroft's Oktoberfest wafted around us from the kitchen. Her pause lingered, heavy with the duty she felt to council. She explained she 'd had every intention of returning. As such, this decision wasn't easy. "In my heart and soul, I believed I was coming back," she said.

Many people in and out of the paper's office, or in passing, have speculated to me that the mayor's medical leave was more of a stress leave. I asked Jenkins if she could clarify the reason behind her leave. She shook her head. She said her friends who knew, knew, her friends who didn't, didn't. She left it at that.

Delivering her letter to council followed much soul-searching. When Jenkins realized she wouldn't be coming back in the short term, she knew it wasn't fair to leave council a member short.

"It's not fair because there's a member missing. Deputy mayor [Paul, no relation] Jenkins has stepped up and as acting mayor done an admirable job," Jenkins said. "But it's six people doing the work of seven, and it's kind of been a limbo spot for him. Legally, he's mayor, as acting mayor, but I'm still mayor."

She added, "It's been long enough. I know I'm not going back in the immediate and it's only one year until the next election. There's no point in me hanging on. Let them get on with the business of the day, with the proper authority, with the proper numbers."

Council will vote on who will be its new leader when the mayor's resignation takes effect. It does not automatically fall to acting mayor Jenkins.

"We're very grateful for the mayor's many years of service," he said before Bancroft This Week met with the mayor Sept. 29. "I personally want to thank her for being an excellent mentor. I have learned quite a bit from her. We wish her all the best and we know that she will still be keeping a keen eye on the operations of the town."

Changing the subject to the future, the mayor's usual patient way of speaking picks up, flowing quickly from one topic another. Keeping a keen eye might mean political lobbying for the two-term councillor and one-and-three-quarter-term mayor. On her agenda, having Bancroft's 11 kilometres of connecting links for Ontario highways among the largest spans of any municipalities in the province, she noted "kept up by the province. She'd also like to see better signage for traffic mediators at construction sites and the process for MPAC reassessments sped up just to name a few.

There are many things she'd like to see changed to benefit the town. She said she'll still be taking it easy for a while and focusing on her health, but stepping back from council doesn't mean her interest in politics and helping people will wane.

I asked the mayor about some of her fondest memories on council, and some of her greatest disappointments. Her hands came together. She turned them over one another.

She's careful about what she chooses perhaps a bit overwhelmed. She's said she regrets not being able to finish her second term as mayor. She feels she's disappointing those who supported her to take the role.

That being said, Jenkins is a woman of the people. She's enjoyed attending every community birthday, every graduation, every celebration by an organization and every event in between that she could.

"I loved the town before I started. I loved the people," said Jenkins. "Frankly, as time went on I got to know them better. I don't pretend to know everybody, and I don't pretend to have supported everybody's wishes and wants, because that's just not so. But I got to know a lot more people, and I got to know their lives a little bit and I was invited to come and celebrate with them. These were happy times."

As far as disappointments, there were as many as there were highlights, she suggested.

"A lot of moments that I wanted to be able to do something for the town that I couldn't do," Jenkins explained, the pitch of her voice turned frustrated, it neared breaking. She noted Bancroft's old IDA lot, also known as Block 68. The town has been unable to sell and use it, but at one point, had high hopes for it.

"When council as a whole could work together and make something good happen for the people, that was wonderful. Even if

we couldn't, if we worked and made the attempt, that was worthwhile.?

Moving forward, Jenkins wished council the best of luck. She encouraged the next mayor, and councillor, to ?trust their staff to give good advice.? She said it's important to remember that the municipality fits together like a puzzle ? the whole picture doesn't come to fruition if it's missing a piece.

?Always keep the bigger picture in the front. You have to deal with each individual, but never lose sight of the big picture.?