

Let's talk with our neighbours

To the Editor,

Now a lot of folks are not going to like this letter, as I am going to talk about our regional hub, Bancroft, and its relationship with its neighbours.

Here is what I said in 2013 as background:

?Bancroft has always envied the rich tax base created by MPAC for the extensive waterfront properties in Hastings Highlands. And this has been a blessing for HH municipal politicians.

Consider this: in the 2006 to 2010 municipal term it provided nine to 10 per cent increases in revenues due to assessment increases alone (not new construction) each and every year. The prior council added to this with increases in the municipal tax rate. Lots of new buildings, equipment and growing costs and debt ensued.

Bancroft has not had it quite so easy. They don't have the waterfront properties; they are saddled with expensive infrastructure costs like water and sewage systems as well as recreational and cultural programs as they are the primary community centre for the area. And they have had weak industrial, commercial and residential development for some years. no wonder their tax rate has been persistently high.

Now it seem to be a good marriage with two adjoining municipalities each bringing a different set of attributes, and it would eliminate or reduce the bickering and back biting we have seen in the past. A tax rich municipality with a limited servicing profile combined with the regional community hub in the area, with a much more developed servicing profile but a weak taxing base.?

This is not a pitch for formal amalgamation. But it is important to sit back and consider in 2017 where we are and why a collaborative relationship amongst North Hastings municipalities is such a bad idea as many folks suggest to me. It happens every day in corporate life; currently Ford and General Motors are jointly working on a new transmission. Competing newspapers set up joint publication plants.

Maynooth has lost their only bank and their public school has been threatened with closure, so despite great work by the municipality and the local business improvement area to reinforce a strong retail core, it's going to be really difficult in the future to sell Maynooth as a fully serviced residential community. It makes no sense to try to replicate all the community services provided in Bancroft. But Maynooth and Bird's Creek, two of our HH regional centres, could work more collaboratively (that word again) on zoning, economic development, municipal operations for cost saving, creating a more regional focus (without the high cost of regional government or amalgamation).

Now the third rail in this scenario is the large Bancroft debt (both municipal and for water and sewer services) which would be assumed if we were talking about amalgamation, which we aren't.

And the province has been unprepared to force or even encourage any collaboration or amalgamation between municipalities. So don't bring this up; it's not going to happen.

But there are some good examples of a collaborative approach in North Hastings working as a win-win, such as fire services, and the library CEOs who get together regularly. And there has been some joint work on hazardous waste as well as tourism marketing.

But if you look closely at all of the functional expense areas that small rural municipalities struggle with such as general government costs and services, roads, dumps, recreational services, policing, planning and development, there are many more possibilities if our legislators can put aside their territorial egos and sit down for a full and frank discussion sometime. Think staffing, purchasing, user fees, zoning and many more. Some are less likely such as grant applications which are set up to be competitive by the province. And this is not meant to exclude the other municipalities in North Hastings such as Carlow/Mayo, Faraday, Wollaston. I simply don't have any experience with them, but they know the problem.

Nor is there any reason not to jump County lines and consider collaboration with Madawaska Valley or other neighbours in Haliburton or Renfrew.

Regardless of what happens in next year's provincial election, we can count on no additional help from the province in the short term. When someone in municipal affairs wakes up and realizes it's ludicrous to expect townships of 10,000 to cope with the same bureaucratic requirements as cities, the solution will be to create larger rural municipalities. It's only a matter of time. Why not try out some ideas before the province inflicts its solution? Isn't it worth a meeting sometime soon as budgets for 2018 are on the horizon and taxpayers get real cranky about tax increases just before an election?

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