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Council considers safety regulations after rally

By Nate Smelle

On Jan. 9 some 50 Bancroft residents, including members of the Gnomes for Social Justice and Equality, entered a closed session of council at the Club 580 and refused to leave. Since then, Bancroft Mayor Paul Jenkins and CAO Hazel Lambe have been reviewing the town's and the province's policies and procedures to ensure the safety of council members and staff.

Jenkins described the ?intrusion? as an ?upsetting experience.? He stated in a press release issued by the town, ?These actions represented a disregard for the safety of our staff and members of our council. We will take every step necessary to keep workplace safety a priority and we are committed to providing whatever supports are necessary for staff or members of council as a result of this incident.?

After reviewing the town and provincial policies, Jenkins said the protest group violated of the rules, provincial statutes and town bylaws. He also stated anyone is eligible to speak during an open session of council if they make a written request in advance of the meeting to appear as a delegation. Jenkins said neither the Gnomes nor any of the other residents taking part in the protest did this.

?Members were asked politely to leave but refused and continued their march to our private council table,? said Jenkins.

?I directed members of council and staff to move to the back room as I am responsible for the safety of everyone and for ensuring that all laws and statutes are upheld. It is my understanding that they occupied our council table, further violating our rights and statutes. This also shows a total lack of respect for the democratic institutions that are the foundation of our society. All members of the public are entitled to the ultimate form of freedom of expression by showing up and voting in the next election and I suggest these protesters do that.?

Councillor Bill Kilpatrick was the only member of council and staff to remain at the table. He said the group stated clearly they came in peace and he didn't feel afraid or concerned for anyone's safety when they entered the meeting. Instead, Kilpatrick said he felt overcome with sadness that people in the community felt so let down by the system that they felt they had no other choice but to disrupt normal proceedings.

Noting the group approached the table as if they were a formal delegation, Kilpatrick said each of the speakers shared their grievances which he considered to be reasonable. One of the saddest messages that came from the group, he said, was that people seem to be losing faith in the political system.

?They had no pitchforks or torches and just wanted to be heard,? said Kilpatrick.

?Civil disobedience does not equal violence or danger. It's a sign that the system is failing and that people are desperately seeking some remedy from their current circumstances. People who have their basic needs met will allow the system to function, but people who cannot meet their most basic of needs have no choice but civil disobedience.?

As a recipient of social assistance, Maureen Gardiner has a basic income of $721 a month. Explaining how from that $721 she must deduct $550 for rent and $150 for heat and hydro, Gardiner questioned how she is supposed to pay for the water she needs to drink, wash and flush her toilet ? when she still needs to eat.

Along with the other residents participating in the rally, she demanded that council roll back the more than 50 per cent rate increase to water and wastewater rates that came into effect in 2017. The group would also like to see council scrap the idea of raising the rates again this year.

By placing such a high price on something that everyone needs to survive, Gardiner said council is forcing residents and businesses to leave town.

?I have friends who are in town and they have to choose whether they pay their land taxes or their water bill,? said Gardiner. ?They are using the [North Hastings] Community Cupboard for a food source, as well as relying on neighbours, family and friends.?

?[One of my friends,] with [her] water bill, because [she] cannot pay the full amount she's just putting whatever she can on it, and yet it still just keeps accumulating. I know of one local business in town that has been occupying the same spot for many years, and they are now being forced to either relocate or close their doors, because they rely on water as a part of their business.?

Lorie Bird, executive director of the Cupboard was another of the residents to speak out at the rally. Bird told council she and the rest of the citizens taking part in the protest were not there to cause trouble. All they wanted was to have their voices heard.

?This is very odd to speak to one councillor,? Bird said. ?I can't even express to you what we are seeing on the frontlines now. It has been such an incredible increase... All I'm asking is that you have the courage to come forward and really hear us.?

The next speaker, Joyce Dale, an Anishinaabe woman who resides in Bancroft, cut off her braids and left them on the table for council. Stepping outside for a moment to regain her composure, Dale said she had no idea why council would walk out and refuse to listen to its constituents.

In the Anishinaabe community, she said something like this would never happen because it is their belief that ?all who come to the circle are welcome.? Explaining the cultural significance of her actions, Dale said when an Anishinaabe person cuts their hair it is a sign of mourning and distress.

?When you go through [Indigenous] country, if you are at a powwow and you see a woman with really long braids, she will usually say that she has had a lot of happiness in their life,? she said. ?I cut my hair six years ago when my husband died, and today something died in this community when they walked out of that room. It was just horrible. Like we say, we need to find our tribe and love them hard. I've made my living here, and I've been in this community for over 25 years. The water rates here are ridiculous. What do we have to do, take it to the United Nations and have them issue their water policy? We are becoming a Third World country.?

With the issue heating up as council considers another five per cent increase to water and wastewater rates for this year, the demonstrators said they plan to build on the momentum from the Water Rally.