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Response to Don Taylor

To the Editor,

The history of the water issue in our community is indeed complicated. I appreciated the information and insight Don Taylor brought to the topic in his recent letter. I am writing to continue the conversation because I have reached a different conclusion after learning the same background story. I still believe that council needs to roll back the rates.

I have been asked why I always emphasize rolling back the rates over providing income support so that people on low incomes can pay higher water bills. In fact, I think we need to do both. I heartily agree that social assistance, pensions and the low wages common in our community need to be greatly improved. I have added my voice to others in appealling to the upper tiers of government to address inequality in serious ways and to provide immediate relief in desperate cases.

I recognize that our town council does not have the tools or resources to do much about income inequality. But they do set water and sewer rates. I think there are good reasons why those rates should be reduced substantially at this time ? for everyone and not just those in most hardship. Why? Because it is fair. And because it is the best thing for the long run.

After reading a lot about the past decisions that led us to this point, I think that the root cause of our problem is not people's inability to pay. It is the too-big, too-expensive water treatment system we have ended up with here in Bancroft. It is unsustainable. Until we deal with that, water will always be too expensive in our town for everyone and our future is at stake.

Don Taylor's analysis is helpful. I would like to add to his list the additional trouble caused when the town did not get the income for processing regional septage as had been promised. I imagine that Don and I are in agreement that not much is to be gained by laying blame here or there.

Past councils didn't know what we know today. Nor can we be sure of all the future holds. Nevertheless what matters is what we can do now.

What our current council can do is roll back the rates by a substantial amount and report the failure of our water system to the province. Towns are legal creatures of the province. Our water system is a responsibility of the town and also the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and the Ministry of the Environment. I am convinced that these officials know as well as we do that Bancroft does not have enough households on our water system for us to have affordable water. If you have lived in a city or mid-sized town, you remember how much less you paid for water there.

The province is responsible to ensure that there is affordable infrastructure in rural as well as in urban areas. This past year rural people called on the premier to make electricity costs fairer in their communities. Now it is affordable water that is at stake.With these new rates Bancroft has joined the ranks of some other small Ontario towns with unsustainable water treatment systems. It is important to remember also that there are communities of Indigenous people where boil-water advisories have been going on for years.

People often have political disagreements about how big they think the role of government should be, but most of us would conclude that government has responsibility for the people's water.

The cost of everything inches up over the years (including the cost of water) while everyone does the best they can to keep up. It can be difficult to determine exactly when water becomes unaffordable in a community, because it doesn't happen at the same time for everyone. I would like to say to our council that you will know when the community cannot afford these water rates when the number of households in arrears grows, some are being cut-off, businesses are closing and when many people turn up in a council meeting, uninvited, because they are desperate for you to know they cannot afford their water.

This is the evidence that council can take to the province to prove that Bancroft must have their help.

The town council and the people have a unique opportunity to come together now. United we can make our case to the province. The upper tiers of government are the ones who can tax the very rich and the big corporations rather than force rural areas into greater poverty.

Dianne Eastman