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County conundrum: official plan denied by province

By Jim Eadie

Hastings County council is none too pleased the province has some changes for its draft official plan according to council Warden Rodney Cooney.

The county's official plan has been in the works for more than a decade and spanned three county councils. After finally being submitted, the plan was returned by the province unapproved at council's regular meeting Feb. 21.

?The mood of the council members ? not too happy at all,? Cooney told *Bancroft This Week*. ?We have done all our due diligence on this. We have tried to get everything right.?

Official plans are required to be prepared by municipal governments and are a critical element in shaping the future of municipalities and the county. In 2014, Ontario issued a Provincial Policy Statement of how it expected the plans be prepared and policies they must conform to. That move was akin to poking a hornet's nest with a stick.

Small municipalities saw the statement as a hindrance to development in their jurisdictions. For example, under two different reeves, Wollaston councils campaigned long and hard against a requirement that would deny any further residential development on private roads. It was seen as extremely limiting to the township's aspirations with the context that over half of Wollaston's tax base is on private roads, mostly cottages.

Local county planners drafting the new document resisted pressure from the municipalities to stray from the provincial policy. This caused friction between the municipalities, and the planners and province.

?We gave up,? said Wollaston Reeve Graham Blair. ?It's not in the draft ... It's not going to happen.?

The current issue with the province over the draft plan, is the county's request to slightly alter urban boundaries. These are small selected areas of land adjacent to four towns or hamlets in Hastings County. The proposal is to now change boundary lines to include them within the ?urban settlement? designation.

Bancroft is one of those towns, with a proposal to change an 86.5-hectare square of land surrounding Hwy 28 at the east end of the Town of Bancroft.

In his report, director of planning for the county Justin Harrow wrote, ?In short, the ministry's concern is that the county's Growth Accommodation Study indicates that we have sufficient lands in the current urban settlement areas to accommodate forecasted growth, and as a result the county does not meet the requirements set out by the province.?

Harrow suggested two possible solutions; change the county proposed areas to be designated as ?preferred location for future expansion only,? or to return to the original boundaries. Staff recommended in the report that council select the second option.

?Bancroft would support the second option, and leave the boundaries where they are,? Bancroft Mayor Paul Jenkins said. ?We are caught between a rock and a hard place. The province wants us to fill up all existing urban areas, and we still have lots of room ? We are fine with the county's suggestion to keep the original boundaries, and we can see where it goes from there. Lay back and see where the chips fall.?

Cooney however suggested he isn't backing down. County council did not agree with either of Harrow's suggestions.

?In Stirling-Rawdon, we have two long-term care homes [that] have talked about expansion,? said Cooney. ?All we are asking for is two small pieces of land now presently not considered part of the urban core. With these two small pieces, it would then square up the town.?

He added, ?We agreed to send the draft back to [the province to]? tell them that this is what we would like and why,? said Cooney. ?If not, we will have them down to explain to us why ? not hiding behind their desks in Toronto. If I was a betting man, I would bet they will say nope. Ultimately, the province wins ? I know that.?

Villages of Marmora and Tweed are also impacted by the provincial decision.

?We will be in limbo land until we hear back from the province,? concluded Cooney.