

For the People, by the People



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By Nate Smelle

After sitting in on a pair of public meetings last week, I found myself wondering how useful this form of civic engagement truly is. The first meeting was held at the Faraday Community Centre on Jan. 9 to provide an update on the proposed Freymond quarry. Despite the fact that all the regulatory agencies reviewing the application had signed off on the project, there were still some 40 concerned citizens in attendance looking for a response to good questions that remain unanswered.

Having written on the proposed quarry on several occasions since the public caught wind of it in 2015, there was very little in the presentation by Brian Zeman, the Freymond's representative from MHBC Planning Urban Design & Landscape Architecture that had not already been shared with the public at previous meetings. Following his presentation, I did learn something new though from his response to a question by real estate agent Catherine van der Oye.

As a resident of Bay Lake, van der Oye asked whether the Freymonds or anyone involved in reviewing the application had consulted with someone in the real estate business regarding how the proposed development could impact the value of neighbouring properties.

Surprisingly, Zeman informed the audience that this had not been done, because under the Aggregate Resource Act it is not necessary for an applicant to take into consideration the impact of such a development on neighbouring property values.

Thinking of how the sound of jet skis can be heard along Detlor Road more than a kilometre away from the nearest lake on a sunny summer afternoon; and how the noise produced by a quarry operation of this size and type could affect the bottom line of Grail Springs Wellness retreat CEO/founder Madeleine Marentette and her 40+ staff, it occurred to me that van der Oye's question had helped to uncover a major flaw in the Aggregate Resource Act.

The second meeting took place the following night in Maynooth.

The purpose of this meeting was twofold. One: to inform Hastings Highlands' residents about council's decision regarding whether to allow retail cannabis outlets in the municipality. And two: to give the public a chance to share their input on the matter.

Once Mayor Vic Bodnar finished presenting the information the municipality had to share, the audience enthusiastically urged

council to opt in on allowing retail cannabis outlets in the municipality.

Grateful for the chance to share their ideas several people took the time to discuss the opportunities for healing, tourism and economic growth they believe cannabis retail would deliver the community.

Getting back to my original question of whether these types of meetings are worthwhile, my initial instinct is to respond, yes.

Whenever any level of government takes the time to engage with the people they are elected to represent, I see it as a step forward in the right direction.

However, whether that one step forward heading in the direction of progress turns into two steps backwards, depends on whether our elected officials listen to the public and use their input in a way that makes life better for the majority of the community.

Therefore, to serve our democracy well we must ask ourselves this: what exactly does a government for the people and by the people mean?

Does it mean that the people elect individuals to make life, community and earth-changing decisions, and then trust that they will follow through? Or, does it mean that we the people are required to remain politically engaged by advising and directing the individuals we have elected to serve our best interests over the next four years?

Noting how well-informed and engaged the public was at both of these meetings, and the many valid points and ideas shared, the responses from our elected officials regarding both of these matters will be very telling in terms of how they define a government for the people and by the people.