

Growth is not the answer



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By Nate Smelle

With the water and wastewater rates in Bancroft about to go up again it is difficult to see a bright side to the town's ongoing crisis of affordability. However, Bancroft's economic development strategic plan consultant, Malcolm Hunt recently took a shot at it during a presentation on Phase 1 of the economic development strategic plan. During this presentation, it was reported that he maintained the town's costly and underused water treatment facility could be seen as an asset to the municipality from a certain point of view. Hunt's report claims, "There are some real opportunities here for both regional and Bancroft wins but this will require some non-traditional thinking."

A wastewater treatment facility built to serve 10,000 households, currently servicing less than 2,000 an asset? Non-traditional thinking? I'm intrigued.

Reading on a little further it didn't take long to realize that the type of thinking being encouraged here was nowhere near what I would consider to be: "outside the box."

The solution on the table, the same old mantra we have been hearing for at least a decade "expanding our tax base through growth. In a sense, this is non-traditional thinking by Bancroft's standards. Many who live here accept incomes 30 per cent lower than the provincial average, because they enjoy the small town vibe and the stunningly beautiful natural landscape. However, the amount of "growth" necessary to make water affordable for everyone to drink, flush and wash would mean this vibe, along with much of the surrounding wilderness within the water pipes' reach would inevitably disappear.

Sure Bancroft's wastewater treatment facility may have the capacity to handle growth that other communities do not have, but, before we go down this road we need to ask a few very important questions.

First, where will we put these thousands of households needed to bring the cost of water services down?

Second, how can we attract thousands of people to move, live and work or retire here on a permanent basis? Even if every one of the approximately 200 or so people Aero Pon Leaf Canada plans to hire at its cannabis production facility were to move to Bancroft, the municipality would still fall far short of the number of new ratepayers required to make a difference.

And third, even if we can attract that many people; even if we can squeeze enough cookie-cutter subdivisions within Bancroft's borders and connect them to the water/wastewater system, is this truly the future we want for our town?

The language of politics can often be confusing, so to clarify, "growth" in this case means urban sprawl. It means irreversibly altering this community and landscape beyond recognition.

I do agree that we need growth, but it must be sustainable.

While the town may want us to believe that if we think positively about this crisis of affordability it will suddenly go away, it will not. There is no easy way out for Bancroft in this predicament.

Previous councils and provincial governments have kicked the can down the road for far too long.

?Growth? at all costs is not the solution. The provincial government got Bancroft into this mess, and it is time for them to take responsibility. We live in a country where the majority of people seem to have no problem with spending \$4.5 billion of taxpayers money to bail out a multinational corporation by buying the Kinder Morgan pipeline. When people in Bancroft are having to decide whether to buy food, medicine, pay their rent, hydro and water bills, why wouldn't the province, or even the federal government for that matter, step in and provide the \$2 million or so Bancroft needs to ensure everyone has affordable access to this absolutely essential resource?