

Fear and helplessness in Bancroft



June 11, 2019 By Nate Smelle

Last Tuesday afternoon the North Hastings Community Trust released its findings from the Water and Wastewater Survey it conducted in Bancroft between Feb. 22 to March 25. The three main themes to arise from the survey included: quality of life; a shared sense of fear and helplessness; and a desire to leave the Town of Bancroft.

While representing the Bancroft Family Health Team at the press conference, Sean-Lee Popham explained how Bancroft's abnormally high water/wastewater rates are affecting people's health and diminishing their quality of life. Evidence of this was found in the fact 78 per cent of respondents acknowledged how because of the high water rates they have had to reduce spending on other basic necessities of life. Even more telling was how when people were asked what they would spend their money on if their water/wastewater bills were reduced, most of their responses were directly associated with healthier living. Citing the data collected through the survey, Popham said that 63 per cent of people said they would spend more on healthier food; 28 per cent would spend more on recreation or sports; 25 per cent would spend more on medical expenses; and nearly 24 per cent would use the additional funds in their household budget to pay for counseling or therapy.

The survey also revealed that there is an overall sense of fear and distrust in governmental decision-making in relation to Bancroft. Trust board member Rebecca Mal-Eshun pointed out that the survey found that many people in the community have lost faith in government on all levels because they tend to make decisions without engaging with the people their choices and policies impact most.

Lacking this civic engagement at the grassroots, Mal-Eshun said this "makes people feel afraid and out of control of their lives." In the absence of a clear solution and a government meaningfully attending to the crisis at any level, Mal-Eshun said "an atmosphere of pain, fear and helplessness" has developed in Bancroft.

For many in the community, this fearful sense of apathy combined with a degraded quality of life and poorer health have triggered a response to leave town. In fact, 46 per cent of respondents said they would move to another municipality given the opportunity; and 63.5 per cent they would not recommend Bancroft to others as a place to live.

As one half of a physiological response known as fight-or-flight, this reaction from nearly half of those surveyed in the community is to be expected. The fight-or-flight response is a physiological reaction that occurs in the presence of something mentally or physically terrifying, which either compels an individual to stay and deal with a threat or to run away to find safety. While the municipal and provincial governments argue over who's to blame, the community is left with a choice regarding which of these two options is most compelling in terms of finding and implementing a solution.

One thing that is for certain is that if a solution is going to be found it will not come from apathy. Through the survey the Trust has also established a series of recommendations for each level of government and the community. I will not go into each of the recommendations here, however a full copy of the Water and Wastewater Survey report can be accessed on the Trust's website at: www.nhct.ca.

Ultimately, the survey's findings point a finger at a much bigger problem than just people's water and wastewater woes. Though the high water/wastewater rates are a major contributing factor in the crisis of affordability occurring in Bancroft, the main issue that needs to be discussed is income inequality. As long as we stand idly by while the gap between the rich and the poor continues to widen this crisis will only worsen.

I will however mention one of the Trust's recommendations which involves all levels of government and the community because I believe it to be an excellent starting point. In an attempt to encourage an all-encompassing engagement with community stakeholders, the Trust is advising the Town of Bancroft to invite residents to an open meeting where people can ask questions of council regarding their plans to address the crisis of affordability caused by the water/wastewater rate increase. Worth noting, the town's invite list must also include: MPP Daryl Kramp; Minister of Environment, Conservation and Parks Rod Phillips; Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing Steve Clark; Minister of Children, Community and Social Services Lisa MacLeod; and MP Mike Bossio.

If this meeting takes place, we will be able to tell how much our community matters to each of these elected officials by who shows up.