

In arrears

To the Editor,

For some time I have been watching our tax arrears in Hastings Highlands grow. I was hoping that at the end of 2015 we could show a big improvement over the \$2 million owing at the end of 2014. That is a lot and well beyond what the province suggests is appropriate. While we don't have the final audited results for 2015, it's pretty clear we still have a long way to go to get our tax arrears in control.

In HH we should collect about \$10.5 million in 2015 through property tax, \$4.5 million (over 40 per cent) of which we must forward quarterly to the county and the province. We are simply the tax collectors for them. But what happens when we don't collect the taxes owing? Neither the county nor the province is interested in excuses, they insist on their money on time.

So at a recent council meeting we needed to approve an operating line of credit for 2016 of \$1 million. Mostly this is because we are still owing taxes of about \$1.8 million at the end of last year. Yes, we have seen a reduction from \$2 million at the end of 2014. And yes, the arrears now are more current than they were then.

But we are borrowing money and paying interest to operate the municipality because we haven't been able to get folks to pay their taxes on time. The finance team have assured me that they charge arrears interest to the full extent of the law, 1.25 per cent per month. And HH has contracted with an outside agency that specializes in the recovery of municipal tax arrears to assist.

The team at HH is well aware that our current state is unacceptable and as you can see have made progress both on the amount and the age of our arrears.

And if you live in other neighbouring municipalities like Bancroft or Madawaska Valley, don't be smug; check out the current arrears in your area. They have been high in the recent past as well.

But we need a lot more progress in 2016.

Initial tax bills are now out for 2016. Do your part and pay on time. If you are having trouble making your tax payments, the municipality offers payment alternatives that may suit your needs. Please give a call.

Bill Cheshire

Baptiste Lake