

Bancroft council will sit with ratepayers committee: councillor



At the table, from left, provincial Liberal candidate Tim Rigby, Conservative candidate Daryl Kramp and NDP candidate Nate Smelle listen to Wilma Brethour (left) as she explains what she feels are the community's problems with Bancroft council and the province. / SARAH SOBANSKI Staff

By Sarah Sobanski

Bancroft residents from all walks of life set aside their differences March 25 to support one woman who says she can't be their voice anymore ? not alone. The result is a new committee, supported by councillors, provincial candidates and ratepayers alike.

It was standing room only in Club 580 Sunday. People paid no attention to the first sunny weekend afternoon of spring, choosing instead to squish together in a room fraught with tension.

Convener Wilma Brethour brought her hands together tightly. As the clock closed in on 1:30 p.m. she thanked everyone for coming including provincial Liberal candidate Tim Rigby, Conservative candidate Daryl Kramp and NDP candidate Nate Smelle who sat at a table to her left.

Brethour was armed with issues that have impacted every rural citizen both in Bancroft and across the province. She said the province needed to start listening to rural municipalities.

She asked why policing costs were so high, why hydro costs were monitored down to the impact of a microwave versus an oven, why there was no help to repair roads and why downloads continued to be handed down by the province such as recently proposed firefighting legislation mandating standardized training from volunteers to urban firefighters. Members of the crowd agreed it could cost the area its fire services.

?There is a total disconnect between [Queen's Park] and what we live with every day out here,? she said. She also brought up water and wastewater rates and town taxes.

?We're putting our local people ? our kids, our seniors ? at risk of becoming homeless.?

?It's going to become a ghost town,? a community member shouted out.

When Brethour spoke of Bancroft she said the way council conducted its meetings left those wanting to ask questions or make suggestions feeling small. She suggested the application process and confines of making a delegation were too rigorous and restrictive, that contacting staff with questions was rarely met with honest answers and that there weren't enough people showing up to meetings.

One woman said, ?They shut everyone down.?

A man from the back said he took a day off to make a delegation but because he had missed the deadline, council wouldn't see him. Another woman suggested council didn't want to be honest.

Former mayor Lloyd Churchill said when he was on council there was a question period allowed at the end of every meeting.



Bancroft Councillor Barry McGibbon asks Brethour if he can stand and say a few things. He later says he'll put a motion forward to council to meet with a ratepayers committee, should the meeting choose to establish one. / SARAH SOBANSKI Staff

Town Councillor Barry McGibbon stood up to these allegations. He was in attendance with fellow Councillors Tracy McGibbon and Mary Kavanagh. He said council allowed questions at its meeting. He noted one of reporters in the audience made them frequently. "Yeah, but that's the media," a member of the public responded.

McGibbon said council did care and wanted to change much of what was affecting residents, but much of the time there wasn't much they could do because of provincial legislation.

He made a choking gesture with each of his hands attributing it to what it was like to get government funding with all three levels involved. He said council had asked Queen's Park for help, but to no avail.

"Council, as far as I'm concerned, they're good people," Brethour intervened when members of the public began speaking over one another. "They ran because they wanted to help but the province has closed in too tight on them."

McGibbon asked people to come and talk to him one on one. He said he would listen and suggested other councillors would as well. Members of the public refuted his claim. Some said they had tried to contact council but no one would respond. One woman said, "Council hasn't been open to the ideas of the community."

McGibbon then offered to put a motion forward to council at its next meeting. He said he'd ask council to meet in an "informal way" with a ratepayers committee, to have real conversations about changes that need to happen in the community.

Almost immediately people began asking if Brethour will lead this committee. She seemed hesitant, wary.

Throughout the meeting Brethour had said she'd been working to discuss the town's issues with council for over a year, and had been discouraged. She suggested the people working with her had the same feelings and didn't know how much in them they had left.

"My sister can't keep doing this alone," Brethour's sister said from the front row.

"Let's stampede the provincial government, let's stampede the municipal government," a woman spoke up.

Brethour agreed to chair the committee. To the town she said, "You have a community that will stand up and fight with you but you have to be honest with us."

After the meeting, people were invited to go on camera holding signs with messages they wished to send to the province. Some of the messages read, "We need fairness for all brought back to Ontario," and, "Canadians should not have to decide between water and food."

As of March 26, 24 members of the community had signed up for the ratepayers committee. All three provincial candidates said they would attend committee meetings.