

Bancroft gets high marks on 'First Impression' visit



By Tony Pearson

It's said that you never get a second chance to make a first impression. But the town of Bancroft needn't be too concerned about that, according to a delegation from Deep River, whose initial reactions to the community were very impressive. 'Welcoming' and 'vibrant' were among the first words to come to mind. If it is true that first impressions last, then Bancroft is making some lasting positive impressions.

The visit was part of the 'First Impressions' program, run by Ontario's Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs. Under the program, two somewhat similar communities exchange teams of 'incognito' observers, who run through a list of town features to check on, and then report back to the town they've visited. Bancroft's partner, Deep River, is a town on the Ottawa River which was founded around the nuclear industry. Their visiting team were varied in age - including a young couple with a family and a couple in their 60s - and in occupation (including a business owner, real estate agent, recreation worker, retiree).

The items that most impressed them were the liveliness of Hastings Street, the variety of stores as well as the quality of their goods and the friendliness of staff, the ample parking, and the selection of restaurants and hotels. They also commented favourably on the well cared-for homes, and the amount of well-maintained parkland and green space (even to the point of having a dog park). The good impressions started with the drive into town, where they commented on the excellent welcome signs and the prevalence of flowers. They also commented on the range of health care facilities and programs, as well as the cultural scene (galleries, theatre, museums) and the emergency services close at hand. They were quite surprised to learn that Bancroft had a bus service (the TROUT).

Information availability had positives and negatives. The Deep River group found signage within the town clear and attractive. They found the visitors' centre staff helpful, and ready with maps and brochures. They observed that retail store staff were quite willing, and able, to provide information about the town. And the Chamber of Commerce, they reported, had good information about setting up a business in Bancroft.

On the other hand, they weren't so positive about the quality or quantity of information at the township office - which they also found hard to find - or at the museum. However, they noted that the two museums were attractive and well-located near family activities. On the other hand, they found the library small and uninviting.

Another area where they had expected more was children's activities. For while they found lots of recreation facilities, and a couple of dynamic programs - York River Public School Summer Program, the youth sports camp at Club 580/Millennium Park - still they did not see any posters for organized activity programs for kids. Nor could they find an arts program for kids.

And although there were kudos for signage overall, the absence of signs to beaches was noted. Nor could the group find a ballfield. They were pleased to find many washrooms, but stated that they weren't always clean. Nor did they feel there were enough garbage and recycling bins downtown. Finally, while they praised the walkway along the river, they noted that the grass alongside had lots of 'leavings' of dogs and geese, making it uninviting for families with children.

As far as new opportunities were concerned, the Deep River group noted the coordinated effort on tourism, and suggested that

attention and planning should go into the question of attracting more visitors from visible minorities to Bancroft, given Bancroft's proximity to Toronto and its large numbers of minority group members. They suggested checking how other towns tackle this opportunity.

In the end, stating that the greatest strength of any community was its people, the Deep River team stated that the most outstanding features of Bancroft revolved around its population, who projected positive attitudes, and a strong pride in their town. This was echoed by members of Council; Mayor Jenkins drew special attention to the large number of volunteers who made community events happen, and developed aspects of the community like the hospital. She pledged to have staff and councillors review the comments and recommendations carefully, and then assign responsibility for taking concrete action.

Bancroft will report to Deep River on its 'First Impressions' of that community in November.