

Bancroft receives failing grade for management of infrastructure

By Tony Pearson

Bancroft town council learned last week that once again, it has received an overall grade of 'F' for its failure to provide financially for its aging infrastructure - roads, water and sewer mains, storm sewers, bridges and culverts. The study, done by the Public Sector Digest, stated that every year, the gap between upgrade and replacement needs versus what the town actually does is a deficit of \$3 million.

The picture wasn't completely gloomy. Bancroft's facilities mostly received passing grades for their current condition and upkeep - ranging from C Plus for its bridges and culverts and its sanitary sewers, down to D Minus for its water network and F for its storm sewer network, where the report states that all 219 catch basins are in 'critical condition'.

But the long-term problem is the lack of money set aside to improve Bancroft's infrastructure. The study noted that while it believes the town's roads require \$23 million worth of improvement over the next five years, only about one million in town funding is available. In the other areas - for example, the wastewater network, which needs \$2.7 million - no money is currently available.

The implications for town ratepayers are potentially very serious. To quote the report with respect to paved roads, bridges, culverts, and storm sewers: 'These infrastructure categories are currently funded at 7 per cent of their long-term requirements. (If only local tax revenues are considered) full funding would require an increase of 63.2 per cent over time.' The report suggests an annual tax increase of 4.2 per cent every year for the next 15 years. With respect to water and sewer, with an annual investment short-fall of \$746,000, the report suggests annual rate increases of slightly over 2 per cent a year for each for the next fifteen years.

An annual sewer operating deficit compounds this problem. The latest figures indicate that by the end of the year, the Bancroft sewer account will have a deficit of over \$1.3 million. The town's Chief Administrative Officer states that deficiencies are currently being examined by town staff and the Ontario Clean Water Agency (OCWA). Says CAO Lambe: 'We are making sound progress'; Council will receive a report next month.

Mayor Bernice Jenkins said that she found the Asset Management study 'a fair report', while noting that many municipalities, large and small, face similar difficulties arising from the need to replace aging infrastructure. Staff, she says, will look at the findings and identify priorities when planning the next budget. They will also pursue funding from higher levels of government.

In other business brought to Committee of the Whole, proposed new guidelines for downtown commercial lighting are under consideration. The dominant idea is not to generate 'light pollution' which could impair the beauty of the night sky in the area, which is one of its attractions. Council also wants to ensure that business lighting is professional-looking, without unduly restricting its expression.

Council also got a look at possible new logos for the town, its agencies and events. Diane Eastman, who has been working on downtown appearance (like the heritage banners) and town branding through the Business Improvement Association, presented three options. One is a slight variant on the existing crest, with the other two are more 'modern'; she also showed possible logos for the Gemboree, WWW, the library, the museum, and the proposed Earth Sciences Centre. Eastman will return to Council with revisions, taking comments into account.

Other issues touched on:

- * the amount of new building and renovation is up quite a bit this year - more than double the amount compared to this time last year;
- * the condition of recreational trails for bicycles and ATV's needs to be looked at; a representative of the Trails alliance will come to Council shortly;
- * Council also wants to talk to Bell about broad-band service in this area compared to what's available in other rural areas;
- * Council agreed to waive fees for downtown businesses who upgrade their facades as part of the BBIA design project; the waiver will extend to the end of 2016;
- * As the wild parsnip weed has spread widely in the region and poses some health risks, more public information is required; property owners must eradicate growth on their property.

Bancroft also sent a letter to Hastings County identifying its concerns about the County's draft official plan. Overall, Council wants the minimum amount of restriction on its freedom to decide where housing and commercial developers are allowed to build, and how services to developers are to be financed.

This message had also been conveyed to the provincial government at the recent conference of the Association of Municipalities of

Ontario (AMO). Bancroft objected to the two-year freeze on amendment to the County plan, and to other elements like severance and private road restrictions. Bancroft also objected to downloading of propane inspections and courthouse security to townships, and looked for financial compensation. The town reps also stressed to the Health Ministry the importance of the local hospital to the community, for both social and economic reasons, as well as the extent of local support for the hospital.

At the conference, the town received positive feedback about its community safety planning, as well as the Earth Science Centre, making Bancroft hopeful of provincial funding for the business plan (a six-figure expense). On the other hand, there were no ?bites? on possible provincial assistance to the proposed north sewer.