

## Barry's Bay cultural centre comes under scrutiny



The South of 60 art and visitors' centre in Barry's Bay. Photo by Sarah Vance

**By Sarah Vance**

Uncertainty about the fate of the Madawaska Valley Visitor Information Centre, known also as The South of 60 Arts Centre, is prompting questions from concerned community members in Barry's Bay.

At an April 12 committee meeting for recreation, heritage and culture, it was recommended that rebranding of the Railway Station, which officially opened in 1995, be held in abeyance until such time that further discussion of the use of the Railway Station has been discussed.

This decision comes on the heels of a winter of heated discussions, during which the operations of The South of 60 Gallery have come under the scrutiny of council, with questions on everything from phone lines to financial sponsorship, as well as expenditures for festivals like the annual Wood Stacking Competition.

In February, Councillor Maika requested a report on expenditures over the past five years, as well as the costs of operating the Visitor Centre during the winter months.

The Township owns the building and operates the Art Gallery with the generous support of sponsors and patrons, said Madawaska Valley's chief administrative officer Craig Kelly. The financial relationship has also been discussed in great detail at a day-long special meeting of Council on November 24th in 2015.

A digital survey on the Valley Gazette's Facebook page is tracking public opinion, while an email requesting letters of support is being circulated by Anya Gansterer, Madawaska Valley's tourism and culture coordinator.

You may have noticed that the Railway Station has been in the local press lately, opens the letter, which identifies three possibilities: (1) closing the Railway Station completely after December 2016; (2) maintaining the status quo; or (3) increasing spending on tourism and culture from 2017 onwards.

A Facebook page administrated by Maureen MacMillan is consolidating voices about the organization which oversees 10 festivals and 12 exhibition openings every year in Barry's Bay, and which has nearly 10,000 annual visitors.

The professionalism and art that Anya puts into curating is one of those things that, when done as well as she does, is almost invisible, posted Fran Murphy on April 29.

Sharing our culture with visitors lets them know who we are; it's an important part of tourism and economic development, posted Chris Hinsperger, the manager of Bonnechere Caves and a major tourism promoter.

Let's not break the Railway Station and South of 60 important institutions for building and maintaining the connections that help make this such a dynamic and thriving community, posted Duncan Noble, a resident of Killaloe.

The site also notes that in 2009, the Conference Board of Canada produced a report stating that for every dollar in income that a cultural organization generates, \$1.84 goes back into the community in which that organization is located.

Madawaska Valley Mayor Kim Love has now announced that a previously scheduled council meeting, set for May 9, has been rescheduled for May 18, and relocated to the Yakabuski Community Centre, in order to accommodate public interest about the fate of the centre, including its two staff and 12 active volunteers.