

Boards divided by union proposal

By Sarah Sobanski

The idea of a union library isn't new to North Hastings municipalities, according to Southern Ontario Library Service library development consultant Peggy Malcolm. She's worked in the area since 1996.

Hastings Highlands and Wollaston have both experimented with union libraries before. She said Wollaston and Limerick's union library split up in January of last year due to financial complications. In 2000, Herschel, Monteagle, Bangor, Wicklow and McClure townships amalgamated to become Hastings Highlands. Both union models were thus ended.

Now, both Wollaston and Hastings Highlands libraries have the option of asking their municipalities to disband their boards again in favour of forming a North Hastings union library board. A draft proposal unionizing them along with Bancroft and Carlow-Mayo public library boards was developed by Malcolm and presented to Bancroft council earlier this year.

In 'Union library would provide solutions: consultant,' the third article of this series investigating the idea of a union library for North Hastings, the paper investigated how the mechanics of bringing libraries together under a single board would work.

Ideally, unionization would consolidate administration costs and funds, regulate librarian hours and make service standards across the area more uniform, but not everyone is on board. Just into its first year with its new board, Wollaston isn't looking to jump into another partnership right away.

When Limerick withdrew, the Wollaston library had to create a new board, a new set of policies and bylaws and redraw its budget and operations. That process was understandably time consuming and impacted the operations,' Wollaston's library board wrote in a package it presented to Wollaston council Feb. 13. It recommended council not support the union library proposal.

The board felt changing the board structure again would make it hard to find a new location for the library, including getting volunteers to 'oversee the work required for a new location, including planning and fundraising.'

The board was not keen on the idea of a union CEO. Its report stated that its librarian had managed to keep 'administrative hours at a minimum.' The report said, 'We feel that a CEO in another location is of no benefit to our community.'

The board also suggested it was 'extremely frugal and careful in making sure every penny possible goes towards making [its library] the best library our community can have.'

'We have concerns that sending those funds to a central office could result in less hours or resources for our location,' read the document presented to council. 'We would like to keep our budget local.'

Board chair Peter Lennox didn't respond to the paper's request to comment, but Wollaston Reeve Graham Blair told *Bancroft This Week* his interpretation was that the board wanted to remain autonomous for the 'immediate future.'

'I don't believe the idea of becoming part of a larger union library at some point in the future is totally out of the question,' he said. When asked if a union board would dilute the voice of one library or threaten its autonomy, Malcolm replied via email that 'one could argue that having five or seven people on a library board to represent the community and to speak about what the community wants in their local public library is the best way to get community input.'

She noted however, that 'the purpose of the library board is to ensure that the local library is run with the community needs in mind but not to run it themselves.' She said when setting priorities for the union library surveys could be completed to be certain it was 'on the right track.'

The draft proposal would see citizens or councillors from each municipality on the board. To further ensure their individual voices, libraries could also have 'friends of' committees to pursue more localized projects and fundraising efforts, she said.

Bancroft This Week also spoke with Hastings Highlands and Bancroft Public Library board chairs. Both have interim CEOs for the foreseeable future.

Hastings Highlands chair Majory McPherson said though the discussion has been in the community for a little while, the board couldn't speak to what it would want because the draft proposal hadn't been presented to it or council yet. A Southern Ontario Library Service representative is expected to visit Hastings Highlands council March 21.

'We haven't actually as a board discussed it yet,' said McPherson. 'I think it's more of an urgent matter for Bancroft than it is for us. On the other hand, if we don't get involved in the setting up of it, it may not be exactly what we might want? But when people really want to do something, they do it.'

The opposite of Wollaston, Bancroft chair Noreen Tinney said her board would recommend to Bancroft council to accept the union library proposal 'in principle.'

'This would allow the board to move into negotiations with any of the other local library boards to determine the details of the proposed union agreement,' Tinney wrote to the paper noting she'd like to see libraries unionize sooner rather than later. She said

however, she was cognizant of this year being an election year and that councils might want to leave the decision to their successors.

‘Nothing is written in stone at this point. Once the details [are] agreed upon by the various boards, we would then bring the final proposal back to each of the municipal councils for approval,’ she said.

Tinney said she thought it was fair that each municipality would still have to address its library building concerns on its own. She saw benefits in sharing collections between libraries and in consolidating administration to a central bookkeeper and CEO.

‘Libraries are about people, not about paperwork,’ she said. She noted that the board would be open to have a ‘friends of?’ committee and that while they could work for each library individually, they could also work together on greater fundraising efforts. She said North Hastings libraries have ‘collaborated in the past to get e-readers, iPads and a shared, travelling staff member for training.’ She called the partnership ‘very successful.’

Carlow-Mayo Public Library also didn't return a request for comment. Its township tells the paper its board has not yet made a recommendation to council.

This is the fourth and final article investigating North Hastings libraries and the proposal of a district or union library board between them. Bancroft This Week will continue to cover developments as they happen.