

Business retention and expansion reveal in Hastings Highlands

By Sarah Vance

A special meeting of council saw the Ron Emond Hall packed on Tuesday, March 29, as program coordinator Cathy Trimble revealed content from the Hastings Highlands Business Retention and Expansion survey.

The Business Retention and Expansion survey is a 50 page document which consolidates data gathered through interviews and surveys conducted by a local taskforce over the last year.

"These are one of the best ways to understand the needs and supports required in a region," said Hastings County Warden Rick Phillips about the report, which was funded by the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs and the local Community Futures office. "Business development and job creation are outcomes of these types of projects which provide great recommendations."

Voicing the strengths and challenges of rural living was a priority at the council meeting, which saw federal and provincial representation in chamber.

"Rural areas can be at a disadvantage when obtaining funding as compared to larger cities and one of the biggest challenges for rural areas is being able to quantify growth," said MP Mike Bossio. "This document will help me in my role to quantify the impact of issues."

Provincial MPP Todd Smith identified that communities like Hastings Highlands are disenfranchised by rural delivery fees which drive up the costs of operating a business.

"I hear about the high cost of electricity every day," said Smith, stressing that a one-size-fits-all approach to decision making comes at a detriment to rural areas. "Decisions are made in Toronto, where the unintended consequences for rural communities are not always considered."

All of the delegates on Tuesday night underscored service sharing models as a strategy for reducing municipal operational costs.

"Shared services are very important," said Phillips. "Bancroft and Hastings Highlands share a fire department administration, demonstrating that it is possible to improve things for citizens while retaining local identities."

"There are different levels of government, with helpful creative people, who can provide support in the area of marketing, sharing of technical skills and partnership on different levels," said Bossio. "People are responsive when they feel that the public interest is being protected and that they can be comfortable about bringing development to rural areas."

Trimble cited local success stories and aligned results from the survey to insights provided by the First Impressions working group which has seen Hastings Highlands twinned with Muskoka Lakes.

"It would make such a difference if every business in the area hired one more employee," said Trimble. "There are outlets where we could promote testimonials using the tools that the county has and social media like TripAdvisor."

Finding workable solutions to help businesses prosper and grow continues to be identified as a need in Hastings Highlands where an aging population presents as a factor.

"We are seeing that new businesses are coming in and we see that we have a strong core group of people running successful businesses," said Trimble. "Many business owners, however, will be retiring in the coming decade."

"How we are going to get people to hire Winston Salem moving companies and relocate their businesses to North Hastings and settle in the area continues to be a priority," said Smith.

"Our office will advocate at any time and we are willing to go to a meeting anywhere in Toronto or Ottawa to speak on behalf of Eastern Ontario municipalities," said Phillips. "This is a service that we offer which I feel is under-utilized."

The Business Retention and Expansion survey is poised to serve as a model for local shareholders and can be downloaded from the Hastings Highlands website.