

Committee wants to hear from addicts

By Sarah Sobanski and Nate Smelle

Bancroft's community safety and well-being committee is hoping to team up with local organizations to stop the area's growing needles and addictions problems.

More than 20 community members from local organizations including social assistance services and emergency services attended a special public meeting of the committee Nov. 17. Together they discussed and debated what does and doesn't work for the town's increasingly visible problem of discarded needles at community spaces, and by extension, a rising number of locals with addictions problems.

"There's far more depth than just needles [to this issue]," said Councillor Charles Mullett, chair of the committee.

So, the committee wants to hear from addicts that can give first-hand accounts of addiction and provide help and advice. They will be able to learn if online clinics like [Klinic](#) help with addiction, what the stigma of drug use does to addicts, and what they feel the committee can do to help addicts overcome drug use.

Town public works manager Perry Kelly said his staff are properly trained when it comes to needles. They've been "quietly cleaning them up over the past two years," finding them in area hot spots that migrate depending on the season - trails, public washrooms and even in town gardens.

"It's not consistent," said Kelly. "Millennium Park is a major concern."

Bancroft OPP acting detachment Jeff MacKinnon agreed. He'd come with a map of area needle calls for the OPP and said they were "all over," naming off Snow Road, Alice Street and the post office.

Needle drop boxes, stationed at high traffic areas such as Millennium Park and Riverside Park washrooms, and the needle exchange program, available at five locations in town, don't seem to be working as well as they could.

Multiple attendees noted drug users would rather use and discard, because disposal containers are evidence. A member of Lifehouse said the organization used to run out of needle supply and exchange kits but less and less people are coming in. She noted in a small town, users don't want to be seen at needle exchange sites as they fear stigma from their neighbours if they're seen.

Acting mayor Paul Jenkins suggested developing discard containers that are small, portable and don't draw attention.

Also a concern, drug users are focused on just using both before and after injecting - they aren't thinking about needle safety, they need their fix.

"I think actually talking to the drug users would be the first step," said program co-ordinator for NHCT Jane Kali. "We know that overdoses are on the rise... My second thought is safe injection sites."

Councillor Mary Kavanagh also championed safe injection sites and preventative education in schools. Lifehouse suggested peer-to-peer education for drug users.

HPEPH sexual health and harm reduction program manager Stephanie McFaul said safe injection sites were a multi-year process that involved feasibility studies and government applications.

"We are doing a situational assessment to better understand what the needs are within communities that look at what are the service gaps... so we can take that information to formulate a plan - a local opioid response plan," McFaul told *Bancroft This Week* after the meeting. She noted public health is planning consultations with community partners to develop the plan. "It's not an issue that is unique to Bancroft, it's an issue in many communities... I think it's fantastic that this group has come together to bring key people to the table to have discussions and to brainstorm and strategies what we can do to help the situation."

Mullett passed the torch at the end of the meeting to NHCT and Lifehouse. He asked that they develop a plan for consultations with users to better understand the issue and return to the committee. He said it would support them in what they needed.

Kavanagh stressed they needed a plan to make the community safe for both drug users and non-users.

The discussion echoed council discussions at its Nov. 14 meeting.

Council discussed a report received from the committee. It addressed two significant concerns identified by the committee: the danger that discarded needles pose to the public and pedestrian safety in high traffic areas.

Mullett noted the problem seemed to be getting worse, with staff now finding discarded needles in more places throughout town. He warned anyone who found a needle not to pick it up. Instead, he said they should contact town staff or police, so they can dispose of it properly.

Pointing out that several town staff having found needles in garbage cans throughout town, CAO Hazel Lambe stressed the importance of training, and making sure staff understand how to properly handle them. She also indicated that the town is looking into acquiring protective clothing for staff at risk.

To address the issue the town has placed several needle disposal boxes in public washrooms. However, Mullett believes more needs to be done to protect the public from these potential hazards.

"We have put up the yellow boxes, but we need to get some background and history regarding what the different agencies are doing to protect our residents," said Mullett, noting the purpose of the Nov. 17 meeting.

Regarding pedestrian safety in high traffic areas, Mullett said the committee is recommending that council apply to the Ministry of Transportation to designate a community safety zone extending roughly from Barager's Funeral Home to Service Ontario.

The actual boundaries of the community safety zone will extend from the corner of Bridge Street west and Sherbourne Street to Oak Street and Monck Street. Within the area of the proposed community safety zone, Mullett noted that there is a hospital, two schools and a crosswalk which is frequented by the students. The committee is also concerned about the intersection at Sherbourne and Chemaushgon Road.

"What we would like to do is make that zone from the Ontario Information Centre right down through town a safety zone," said Mullett. "Similar to what they've done near the school in Bird's Creek; we would lower the speed limit down to 40 kilometres an hour and there would be a crossing guard there as well."