

Council ponders official County plan



By Tony Pearson

Bancroft's town council had a chance to review the draft of Hastings County's next official plan at a pair of meetings last week. While such discussions can be almost as sleep-inducing as watching paint dry, nonetheless the plan can have important implications for future development in the region. It can restrict what someone can do with their property, or it can indirectly force a municipality to expand the services it provides – with a resultant impact on its budget. And the time frame is long-term; the theoretical duration of the plan is 20 years – until 2036.

In general, councillors are in favour of planning. As Mayor Bernice Jenkins put it, 'It helps us deal with development plans and spending on town services through a logical and common-sense lens of priorities and stages.' At the same time, councillors don't like to be fettered in their decision-making, especially by an outside body. Deputy Mayor Paul Jenkins stated that 'The Municipality knows its own needs best.' Councillor Mary Kavanagh even suggested at one point that Bancroft should 'opt out' of the County plan entirely – something that as it turns out is not legally possible. The overall sentiment however was clearly for the maximum amount of flexibility and range of options achievable.

Of course, as a final resort, if proposed development does violate the Plan, an amendment can be sought. But this adds to the time and cost of a project; the amendment filing fee might be as high as \$12,000.

One consolation to current property owners is that their actual and projected uses are guaranteed no matter what the new plan stipulates. However, if the land is sold, the new owner may not be able to change its uses.

A critical part of the plan is the concept of 'phasing'. This foresees no development of currently undeveloped land until existing land which enjoys town services (or is near them) is fully developed, a process called 'in-filling'. Councillors expressed several concerns about this ideal. One arose from possible interest in business development of 'Phase III' land before in-filling was complete; councillors would be reluctant to turn down such investment.

There was also some worry about a lack of phasing with respect to the adjoining hamlet of Bird's Creek in Hastings Highlands. Some councillors identified the possibility of unrestricted growth putting potentially putting pressure on Bancroft to extend its services to that area, and wondered whether the 'phasing' delay concept shouldn't be applied there.

The whole issue became concrete rather than theoretical when council got a chance to look at County maps identifying which land fell in which phase. Following the old precept that 'the devil is in the details', various councillors quickly identified errors – where there are in fact residences and businesses on land listed as totally undeveloped.

Other concerns were expressed – for example, on a new restriction on the number of severances allowed for a plot of land, and on road requirements for multiple-unit housing. Some councillors were upset that the plan would require major new developments, such as 'big box stores', to pay the full cost of new water and sewage services themselves; they felt that the Bancroft municipal government should be allowed the chance to assist with this financing.

A more 'symbolic' objection concerned the area on the Bancroft end of Dungannon ward. Some Dungannon businesses feel that they might be by-passed on service expansion because they are not part of the designated Bancroft 'urban area'. However, moving

them into this urban zone would require a shift of ward boundaries, which is unlikely.

Giving the complexity of the issues, and in particular the problems with inaccuracies in the County maps, Council passed a resolution requesting additional time for comment. Supposedly, municipalities are to have their remarks in by the end of this month.

Bancroft would like to have until the end of August. As the Deputy Mayor put it, 'they've had years to prepare this; we should have more than two weeks to respond.' Whatever the dates for town comment, the County's plan must be submitted to the province by the end of the year.

County officials quickly offered their assistance. Brian McComb and Justin Harrow of the Hastings County planning department will make themselves available to respond to questions and concerns. For example, McComb felt there was little chance of a rapid development growth in the un-serviced area of Birds Creek.

The public will also need to become engaged. The Township plans to hold a public meeting once the draft is finalized, in order to review its implications and receive additional input. The County would also have representatives at this 'Open House'. Mayor Jenkins foresaw this meeting taking place in the fall.