

Group exploring mobile washroom for local unhoused community

By Bill Kilpatrick

Last year shortly after Christmas before the warming centre arrived in Bancroft, local volunteer Larry Edgar, was delivering food to some members of the unhoused community who had lost their shelter due to a fire. In order to stay warm, they constructed a rudimentary shelter in its place and when Edgar came upon them, according to a press release by Edgar, they were covered in soot from huddling close to a fire and "looked like they were chimney sweepers from the 19th century." The sight was shocking to Edgar who was informed by them that, unlike large cities where many of the unhoused have access to bathrooms or even showers there was nowhere in Bancroft that they could go to have a proper shower or even clean up. "I thought, 'This is horrible,'" said Edgar, "They can't live this way." At this time the bathrooms in Bancroft were open part-time but it was very difficult for them to have a sponge bath due to privacy issues. It was at this point that Edgar had an epiphany "If they can't go to a shower, maybe a shower can go to them." Edgar then got a group of like-minded people together to see if they could create a "mobile washroom trailer" that would be able to travel to members of the unhoused community. According to Edgar's press release the mobile shower would contain amenities like "a small waiting room, a washroom with a shower, toilet, sink, storage for towels personal care items, and a mechanical room for fresh water, grey water tanks, water heater and generator." They worked on the project all summer and managed to come up with some rough schematics, and at the same time they managed to acquire a used RV trailer that they have stripped down to the undercarriage. The group explored buying a commercial vehicle, but the price tag of \$75,000 to \$100,000 was well beyond what they could afford and what they felt the community would support. So, the group looked into what it would cost to build their own. The trailer chassis was used as a base for their research and eventually the group came up with a floor design based on its size and weight capacity. "We determined that it is feasible to build a mobile washroom on a 20-foot frame that fit within the dimensions and the weight limitations as well," explained Edgar. The group estimated that it could potentially be constructed at a cost of between \$15,000 to \$30,000 depending on certain factors such as volunteers, supplies, donations, labour, etcetera. The group has broken the project down into four distinct phases. Phase one's goal is now complete explained Edgar, "The first goal was to determine the feasibility and we've done that. Now we have to put it out to the public to see what kind of response there is. If there is support for this then we need the public to step in. We need experts who can fundraise so we can start raising money and we need people to promote the idea that's phase two." Phase three, according to Edgar, would involve the actual build and phase four would be how the mobile shower would operate. The plan has been sent to multiple levels of government for feedback including the Town of Bancroft, the Hastings and Prince Edward Health Unit, the County of Hastings, MPP Ric Bresee and MP Shelby Kramp. All parties that responded so far have been positive regarding the project and the main concerns from those groups has been what will happen with the sewage and grey water, an issue for which the group is currently exploring their options. Edgar outlined three reasons that he feels that this project is worthy of support by the community stating, "This is a long-term problem that we have regarding homelessness and people using drugs. Having that shower of course will make them feel better [and possibly raise] their self-esteem and help them get off drugs? Secondly, they are going to be more accepted within the town. When you're filthy dirty and stink and want to go grocery shopping that can be a real challenge. If they're clean, they're more accepted by the community, reducing stigma. And then of course there is the health side. If they are clean they will be healthier and there is less of an impact on the healthcare system as they will not have to visit the hospital as much." Edgar's wife Judy, who has also volunteered to help the unhoused, pointed out that foot problems and infections tend to be ongoing issues for many members of the unhoused population. The group Edgar formed is now looking for public feedback on phase two and has planned a public meeting at St. Paul's United Church on Wednesday Oct. 23 at 6:30 p.m.. Edgar wants to reiterate for those looking to attend that, "This is just the beginning of a long process." For those who cannot make the meeting but would like to find out more, give their feedback, or offer their skills and/or time in terms of volunteering, Edgar has asked that people send him an email at Larry@mut.ca or call him at 613-332-1480.