

Hastings Highlands CAO to retire



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By Nate Smelle

Hastings Highlands CAO Pat Pilgrim recently announced that she would be retiring from her role with the municipality before the new year.

Pilgrim has worked in municipal politics since April of 1983. She began her career as an assistant to the clerk in Raglan Township before taking on the role of clerk/treasurer with Radcliffe Township in 1995. From there, Pilgrim was hired to fill the position of CAO/clerk with the newly amalgamated municipality of Madawaska Valley in 2000. Two years later, she moved to Madoc where she became the CAO/clerk for Centre Hastings. After seeing an ad in the newspaper indicating that Hastings Highlands was hiring a CAO, Pilgrim then decided to apply, and was hired in March 2015.

Pilgrim said what she has enjoyed most about working in municipal governance are the people she has met over the years.

"Of the three levels of government there is more interaction with the public in this level of government than you find in the other two levels," said Pilgrim.

"Even when we don't have the authority - like when the hydro is out and people call here. We seem to be the source of information, or at least the expectation from the public that we would be that source. So it is definitely more local."

Pilgrim said another aspect of her occupation that she has found very rewarding are the challenges she has faced. Because Hastings Highlands covers such a large geographic area it has nearly 1,000 lane kilometres of roads, nine landfill sites, five community halls and six fire stations, she said there have been plenty of rewarding challenges in the municipality. With limited revenue available, Pilgrim said one of the biggest challenges has been in making sure residents have access to all the services they need.

Although there are similarities with each municipality, Pilgrim said one of the things that has made her work so challenging and interesting is that each municipality operates differently. She has also enjoyed the challenge of meeting the changing legislation from the province, as well as finding solutions to issues within the community as they arise. Pilgrim said it is this ever-changing nature of working in municipal politics that makes the work so interesting.

"Every day is different and no two days are the same," she noted.

"You come in and you think you are going to deal with X, Y and Z and then once the phone rings or something happens you have to deal with the issue that is on the table at the time."

While working with Hastings Highlands, Pilgrim has achieved several successes. A few of her accomplishments that she is most proud of include: securing funding for Municipal Road 62 in 2019 that had previously been denied for several years; developing a design and operations plans for each of the nine landfill sites; the completion of a Roads Needs Study; decreasing tax arrears from 2014 to 2018, and in turn improving the municipality's status on its municipal report card in this category from high to low risk by the Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing; helping to establish a procurement policy; implementing a buildings and facility strategy; the amalgamation of Hastings Highlands fire services after the municipality ended its relationship with the North Hastings Fire Service; and having the bylaw passed to allow Hastings Highlands to transition away from voting by wards to voting at-large. When asked what advice she had for anyone interested in following in her footsteps, Pilgrim said they need to realize that change doesn't happen overnight in municipal government.

"Policies and procedures have to come to council for their approval, so we as staff have to provide that policy or procedure to council for them to approve," explained Pilgrim.

"So it always takes time. It is not like a business where you can make a decision today and that decision can be implemented tomorrow."

Having enjoyed her career, Pilgrim said she will miss her work and her colleagues, however she is looking forward to the next chapter in her life. She said what she is most excited about is spending more time with her six grandchildren and her mother. Pilgrim said she also plans to travel and play as much golf as possible.