

## Hastings Highlands prides itself on being progressive



By Nate Smelle

Members of Council in Hastings Highlands got together with staff and members of the public on Wednesday, March 11 to put their heads together and come up with a strategic plan for the municipality moving forward. Steering the conversation and helping to move it forward was Penny Sharman of Sharman Municipal Consulting. The full-day session was intended to help the municipality define a common goal moving forward.

"Basically what it is, is a tool for you to look and see where you're at and what you've got, what you don't have and what is a threat," said Sharman.

To help the group identify its goals Sharman led the group through a SWOT analysis. This was intended to help the municipality recognize its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. Before a community can do this you must first establish both its vision and its mission, explained Sharman. This means coming up with an idea of what the community wants to be and how it wants to become that way.

"Wayne Gretzky once said, I skate where I think the puck will be," she told the group when describing how they could achieve their goals.

"It's all about anticipation."

Many of the municipality's strengths were attributed to its "outside the box" approach to governance. The mutually beneficial relationship between the municipality and the Hastings Highlands Public Library (HHPL) was mentioned repeatedly during the discussion as a good example of this strength.

"I believe that the only reason that we are where we are is that we were allowed to be what we are," said HHPL's CEO Kim McMunn.

"If our governance here had stipulated that the library is the library and the municipality is municipality that definitely would've squashed a lot of things. Good governance is having an open-minded Council that is willing to try something that is not traditional."

"The library is the library and the municipality is the municipality but there are no barriers between our doors," added Mayor Vivian Bloom.

?We collaborate on so much and we work together on things. I think to survive those type of barriers have to be broken down. It's the same as us working with Bancroft on a joint fire service. Even at the county level we are constantly looking at what County services can be shared at the municipal level. We are constantly asking how we can all help each other.?

Many of the strengths pointed out at the session were also named as weaknesses. Manager of corporate services Robyn Rogers sees the overall size of the municipality in this manner.

?Geographically we are the largest and I think that it adds a lot of punch when people are looking at the area,? said Rogers.

?Our logo says Beautiful by Nature and I see that as a strength, but then jumping over to weaknesses I think we could utilize what we have here more in regards to our natural resources.?

Sharman said ratepayers want to know what they are getting and supporting with their tax dollars, so it is important to keep them in the loop with municipal affairs. She believes that keeping the public informed is keeping them engaged.

?The education needs to start with council,? said Councillor Nancy Matheson.

?We need a greater understanding of the staffing, the organization, and everything each person does, and what has increased and where the needs have grown. Then we can answer the questions better as well.?

?I think to be a strong progressive Council we need to be an informed Council,? Councillor Mike Leveque said.

The group also came up with a number of threats to the well-being of the municipality. Two major concerns raised during the discussion were the municipality's cost of maintaining an aging infrastructure with a lack of funding from federal and provincial governments, and its minimal means of generating revenue. Finding ways to better utilize the municipality's natural resources and lessen its impact on the environment was also a priority of the group.

?There are a lot of pressures we put on our lake waters and we need to work in many areas to protect the environment of our lakes,? Bloom said.

?If they become ill they will devastate our economy and the people that own lakefront and the value of their property. The health of our lakes has to be a priority. It's not just for the money that they bring in we want them here for future generations.?

To conclude the brainstorming session the group came up with a ?wishlist? for the municipality. Sustainable public transit, better communication between council, staff and the public, better protection for lakes, a parks and recreation department, economic growth and development, and a more comprehensive infrastructure plan that includes a strategy for managing Hwy. 62 were all on the list.