

Hydro One ombudsman to visit Bancroft

By Sarah Sobanski

Hydro One ombudsman Fiona Crean is coming to Bancroft.

Crean will visit the Royal Canadian Legion Branch 181 on Oct. 6 to hear residents' concerns about Hydro One including billing, transparency and customer service issues. She will deal with both individual and systemic concerns so that she can return to Hydro One proceed with investigations that she said could lead to fixing problems with thousands of customers at a time.

"I'm doing this all over the province. As an ombudsman, I have the power to investigate. I have unfettered access to all information in the company. I can go in, I can look at files [and] I can make requests for anything that I think is relevant. But at the end of the day I only have the power to recommend," said Crean.

She added, "This office is new to Hydro One. I'm separate from management and administration. I report to the board of directors. My job is to hear complaints from members of the public about service from Hydro One. Things they think are unfair ranging from collections, to smart meters not reading, to forestry and not cutting down trees properly."

When Hydro One started selling its shares, and took the company public, it meant that the Ontario ombudsman no longer had the authority to investigate complaints of customer billing issues or customer service complaints. Many issues have arisen since then, which Crean now has the authority to investigate.

Crean told the *Bancroft This Week* that she has run into large problems before between Hydro One and its customers. For example one area's density was misclassified.

"I'm going to answer you in the theoretical, but human error happens," explained Crean when asked why billing issues have become such prominent problem in rural Ontario. She gave an example of when these happenings have occurred before. "The Ontario ombudsman who no longer has jurisdiction over Hydro One, which is why I'm here, investigated the introduction of a new computer system for billings and it was a fiasco. People were getting billings of \$20,000 instead of \$200 and that was a systemic failure of the new billing system which they fixed."

After the Fix Hydro Put Food in the Budget protest last weekend, Crean wanted to respectfully point out exactly what an ombudsman can mean for Bancroft's Hydro One customers.

"I respect [people's] right to protest, I respect their right to be anti-privatization, but I want to make sure that people who are coming to this event understand what they can expect. There are two things that I cannot do, and no ombudsman could ever do, and one is the electricity rates themselves because they are set by the Ontario Energy Board. The second issue I cannot deal with is the privatization of part of Hydro One because that is a public policy decision at Queen's Park."

The event will begin at 6:30 p.m.

"The event is open to all residents of our communities in and around Bancroft, not just chamber members," said general manager for the Bancroft and District Chamber of Commerce Greg Webb, who is working with other community members to bring the event to Bancroft. "Understanding the issues with billing, smart meters and customer service, we believed it was important to us to provide this opportunity to the general public free of charge."

"It's a good opportunity for people to know that this office exists and if they feel that they've been mistreated by the company they can come to me," said Crean.