

Library union proposed for area

By Sarah Sobanski

Three North Hastings library CEO resignations in rapid succession have brought rural public libraries and the way they're run to the forefront of the community consciousness. Especially when, as Southern Ontario Library Service CEO Barbara Franchetto tells *Bancroft This Week*, the high turnover rate is not common in the industry generally.

"In the field in general, there's a transition in that we're seeing a group of CEOs' departures because of retirement. So we're seeing that big change over that way," said Franchetto on library staffing trends. "To then say that smaller libraries are seeing this [resignations] at a higher rate, I don't think there's any evidence to say that is the case."

The loss of Wollaston Public Library CEO Carolyn Henderson in October, Bancroft Public Library CEO Chris Stephenson in November and Hastings Highlands Public Library CEO Kimberly McMunn as of Jan. 5 hasn't gone unnoticed by the service, however.

In a delegation to Bancroft council Jan. 9, service library development consultant Peggy Malcolm and now interim BPL CEO McMunn, are proposing a different way for area libraries to operate. The proposal would see Carlow-Mayo, Wollaston, Hastings Highlands, Bancroft and Faraday establish a union library and board.

"This proposal went to Bancroft and Faraday councils. It has also gone to the members of each of the library boards," Malcolm wrote in an email to the paper after the council meeting. She said the idea for what she suggested is better described as a district library than a union library sprouted from a conversation with Henderson.

After that she spoke with the BPL board. Board members described struggling to keep a CEO when they could only offer part-time hours and a light went off," she said.

"If the communities pooled their library dollars, they could have a full time CEO who would focus on governance, writing policies/procedures, financial areas, grants and reporting, as well as pooled collection development and then the local library staff could focus on circulating materials, helping with questions and computers, and offering programs without worrying about their CEO responsibilities."

Meeting with the paper before her resignation, McMunn suggested local CEOs are pulled in too many directions, and as managers of rural libraries, face too many challenges.

"When you're in the middle of trying to please everyone it's almost impossible," she said, explaining that at HHPL no one is full time. The board is made up of volunteers and her staff varied from one to four members at 12 to 34 hours each. "It's the capacity for the position. That's the challenge as much as anything else."

Alleviating what have been called "administrative" strains from small, individual rural libraries could lighten the load and make the roles of each piece of the library puzzle be it municipalities, library boards, CEOs, the Public Libraries Act, the Municipal Act or community wants and needs more cut and dried.

"The province wants you to run under the Public Libraries Act. Municipalities give us 70 to 90 per cent of our funding [and] want us to run under the Municipal Act," said McMunn.

"Councils appoint library boards, library boards are supposed to oversee the library? Sometimes, in some places, council forgets that they've appointed a board and they tend to micromanage. That causes a lot of problems," she said.

This is the first in a series of articles examining the district or union library option for North Hastings libraries and the challenges that they face. Look for the additional articles in an upcoming issue of Bancroft This Week.