

Little Blue Cabins continues to forge ahead

By Bill Kilpatrick

Kevin Taylor, chair of the board and spokesperson for Little Blue Cabins, continues to make progress towards his goal of helping the unhoused get a fresh start in life. Taylor has had a busy couple months that would exhaust anyone by just thinking about it, but Taylor is more energized than ever leading up to the holiday season. His schedule has included presentations before Faraday council, Hastings Highlands council, Hastings County council, Community Futures Development Corporation, and the North Hastings Economic Development Committee. Taylor has conducted meetings with local mayors, businesses, building inspectors, the United Way, the director of human and community services of Hastings County, members of the Ontario Health Team, and marketing specialists, just to name a few. He has also been doing interviews with members of the media, filling out questionnaires, meeting with stakeholders, and somehow still finds time to teach music and do recording at his home studio. To say he has been busy is an understatement. The meetings have not been for nothing either as many of the seeds that he is planting are starting to bear fruit that is inching the project ever closer to fruition. Taylor continues to be amazed at the generosity and charity that has been shown to him and the project. Taylor told Bancroft This Week that there had recently been a fundraiser at the Bridge Community Church in order to help pay for someone to do the design for the cabins, but when he met with the owner of Havencraft, Pat Marcotte, he was told that there would be no charge for his services. When Taylor heard this he was shocked, "I was doing back flips, I really was," stated Taylor who pointed out that Marcotte's generosity would save Little Blue Cabins thousands of dollars in fees, allowing for those funds to go to other purposes. This generosity comes on the heels of other community members who have offered their services for free as well, including Laura Van Driel, owner of York River Interiors, who has offered to do all the interior design for free, Fraser Young who has offered to do all the landscaping for free as well and Melissa Armstrong who will provide crisis training for the staff. Taylor says that when combined with the expertise of his board members he estimates that he currently has over \$500,000 in in-kind contributions towards the project. His presentation with Hastings County was equally exciting and terrifying, "It was intimidating," stated Taylor, "but seemed well received." The "ask" that Taylor had for Hastings County revolved around them assigning staff to help him work on securing funding for the project, and not only was he assigned some staff he was assigned the director of human and community resources, Deborah Headly, and another team member Jamie Lynn Osmond. However, said Taylor, at the county council meeting it wasn't decided who was being assigned to work with him, only that they agreed to assign someone, and it was only after a meeting with Headly and Osmond, and after a phone call with the Chief Administrative Officer of Hastings County, Connor Dorey, that he found out. Despite feeling a little silly for not realizing that Headly and Osmond were in fact the staff assigned to assist him, he realized though how serious that the County of Hastings is taking the project and how much they too want to see it succeed. Taylor's meeting with Brandi Hodge, the executive director of the United Way, along with two other members of her staff, Alyssa Cook and Kaitlyn Lalonde, appears to also be looking promising. Taylor met them to see what they could offer in terms of support for the project. According to Taylor, Hodge said that the United Way should be able to cover all of the staffing costs, but first they need to have their charitable status number. Taylor said that he has applied for the number and they are just waiting to hear back from the federal government. Another exciting development is that the Little Blue Cabins might have found a land donor. Taylor said that he was approached by two separate individuals in the last two weeks who both have offered to donate land for the project. One parcel of land is located in Faraday Township and the other is located in Hastings Highlands. Taylor was tight lipped about the specifications surrounding these offers stating that there are still many details that need to be finalized before anything can move forward, but that he was hoping to make an announcement shortly. Despite all the media coverage, interviews, public meetings, and online exposure Taylor says that people are still confused about exactly what the Little Blue Cabins are all about and Taylor wants to clarify it once and for all. "One of the biggest misconceptions," said Taylor, "was that we are planning on taking the [homeless] encampment and moving it to another piece of property." Nothing could be further from the truth, said Taylor, who went on to outline the differences between his project and other projects that have been taking place in Peterborough and Kingston. During Taylor's presentation to Hastings Highlands council, Councillor Nancy Matheson, pointed out how she had been following the housing project in Peterborough and had, prior to Taylor's presentation, assumed that the Peterborough project and the Little Blue Cabin project were pretty much the same. Taylor views assisting the unhoused as taking place in three separate, but connected, phases. The first phase, said Taylor, involves warming centres and emergency shelters to provide a warm place for those experiencing unsheltered homelessness. The second phase resembles a "residential healthcare and education facility" which is the vision for the Little Blue Cabins. The third phase would involve long-term affordable housing and employment. Shelter facilities,

says Taylor, often do not provide mental health and addiction supports, while they are available at some, they generally are not mandatory. "It's a way to get people warm, it's not a way to end the cycle of homelessness," stated Taylor. The housing projects that are occurring in Peterborough and Kingston are closer to the emergency shelter model than to what the Little Blue Cabin's are designed for, says Taylor. The Kingston model, while it involved small "sleeping cabins" similar to the Little Blue Cabins, they were for emergency use only, did not provide supports, there were no bathrooms or running water and were moved every six months since their inception, according articles by the CBC and the Whig Standard, and recently Kingston council voted to end the project. Whereas the Little Blue Cabins will be permanently set up in one area, have all amenities including mental health and addictions supports, and will provide programming and short to long-term stability. The site in Peterborough, according to an article on the Modular Bridge Housing project on the Connect Peterborough webpage, is meant to be "interim" housing and "will provide one more option for those experiencing homelessness, in addition to the approximately 106 shelter beds in the housing system," adding that "The site is designed for those currently experiencing unsheltered homelessness." According to the Little Blue Cabin webpage the project is not an "Interim" solution, but is more a long-term transitional housing model and is meant to be specific to each client, nor are the Little Blue Cabins just one of many options for those experiencing homelessness, as there will be an intake process to decide suitability for the program. Little Blue Cabins, according to their webpage, will also accept, not just people experiencing "unsheltered homelessness," but potentially people all across the spectrum including those who are at risk of homelessness with the goal of creating, "a trauma responsive, inclusive environment which enables people to comfortably address barriers to successful permanent housing." However, the website states that priority will be given to those experiencing homelessness. The Peterborough model, like Little Blue Cabins, is also designed to have a "hub" that offers, "case management and service navigation supports, mental health and addiction supports," but unlike the Peterborough model, the Little Blue Cabins will also offer "counselling, job coaching, life coaching, medical treatments, meals," and individualized programming. While the Peterborough model has a "strong focus on connecting residents to permanent housing options," that is not the main focus of the Little Blue Cabins whose goals are more about "striving to provide a social-emotional environment at the cabin community within which residents will feel respected and supported." The selection process for residents is also not the same. The Peterborough model says that, "Offers for accommodation at the site will be based on a prioritization model developed by the City of Peterborough's Social Services Division and with consultation with community partners." It is not clear exactly what this model is or who the community partners are or will be. In terms of the Little Blue Cabin intake process those directly involved in the Little Blue Cabin community will create a small committee whose goal will be to select residents and evaluate their suitability for the community. The criteria will not be based on a model per-se, but will be more based on an individual's desire and ability to be part of, and participate in, the Little Blue Cabin community and the programming it offers. While Taylor agrees that there are similarities between the Peterborough model and the Little Blue Cabins, he does not see it creating a "community" such as he has envisioned. Taylor sees the Peterborough Modular Bridge Housing as a place that will help people move into places like the Little Blue Cabins. While they both have similar goals of finding people permanent housing the way that this will be achieved varies between the two models. "It's a much better plan than many cities have," stated Taylor, adding that, "It will be interesting to watch it unfold ahead of us."