

Local youth consult with minister of rural affairs

By Tony Pearson

When Ontario's Minister of Rural Affairs Jeff Leal came to Bancroft last week, he had two items on his agenda. One was to announce (or in several cases, re-announce) a set of grants for new municipal infrastructure. But once the handshakes were exchanged and the press photos taken, Leal and his aides adjourned to a private session, not only with local mayors but with representatives of area youth.

This was the seventh such roundtable he'd organized this spring; others have been held in places like Perth, Welland, and Penetanguishene. The invitation came to the Youth Advisory Board at North Hastings Children's Services; the goals given were 'to help get youth more involved in community activities' and 'to foster the next generation of leaders of youth-friendly rural municipalities'.

Each meeting is a preliminary to a rural summit being arranged this June in Stratford. Stated Leal: 'By having youth involved and engaged in productive conversations now, it helps bring the debate into the present.'

According to Bancroft reps Brayden Prindle and Kelsey Dillabough (both NHHS students), the Minister wanted to know what might bring youth to rural areas 'and more important, what would induce young people to stay in the rural areas where they grew up.

They informed the Minister that Bancroft did in fact have a number of youth-oriented programs, including sports and area-tailored education programs like Northern Outdoor Studies and Northern Environmental Research (NOS and NERDs). Facilities were available 'some, like the Maynooth Centre, are very well set up. Brayden observed from his own experience that certain institutions like the Fire Department are open to youth, where city departments might not be.

Discussing barriers to full youth participation, Hastings Highlands rep Lexus Scott and others underlined transportation problems 'getting around such a large geographic area. It was difficult to get to Bancroft programs when you're not in town.

Another barrier was communication, especially inconsistent Internet connections.

As far as social services are concerned, it was felt that youth access to mental health services was 'patchy.'

As for jobs, both Brayden and Kelsey noted how many were seasonal, and at the bottom of the pay scale. The need for more apprenticeships along the Loyalist College model was underlined 'programs that actually paid salaries, compared to the unpaid co-op positions. Looking to the summit, the hope for a full 'job strategy' for rural youth was strongly expressed, since lack of career prospects drew many youth toward the big cities.

All in all, Brayden and Kelsey felt the consultation was useful, especially since Minister Leal spent the overwhelming amount of his time listening to the rural reps.

For his part, Leal was also positive: 'We had a great conversation in Bancroft about the importance of good jobs, transportation, infrastructure, broadband and social services, and I was extremely impressed by the youth leaders I had the good fortune of sitting down with.'