

Maynooth Project Steering Committee debate continues

By Bill Kilpatrick

In part one, published in The Bancroft Times on April 3, the letter from North Hastings Children's Services executive director Jessica Anderson, which outlined the reasons why they were stepping down as the lead for the Maynooth Project Steering Committee was discussed along with some of the topics from the Jan. 17 Hastings Highlands meeting. Part two outlines some of the arguments that were put forward at the March 20 council meeting both for and against the project. Fitzgerald began the discussion by stating that, "So, this has come to a head in recent months here. The committee brought forward new revised terms of reference, which council turned down. We invited Jessica Anderson to come and speak with us, but they have decided that, given the situation where it is, they are terminating their involvement with us; I'm suggesting we do the same. We made a good effort at exploring this, and looking into details to see what's possible, but there is no capital funding for a multi-million-dollar building. I think it's better that we use that space, again, aligning with our strategic plan, that we look at reestablishing the farmer's market in that location. It's something concrete; It's something practical and something extremely popular in this area." Councillors Tracy Hagar and Nancy Matheson, who were members of the committee, both spoke in favour of the project. Hagar began by stating that she "will not be supporting this motion," and then gave numerous reasons why the project should be supported. She pointed out that, "This is a project that is very much needed here in the north and if we do not continue to support this project now it's going to be a huge loss to our community." Hagar added that "this project was always and would always continue being in the hands of council to approve. The project has been approved by council every step of the way and has always been transparent." Hagar went on to highlight what she felt were the positive aspects of the project including job creation, the attraction and retention of young families, the supporting of Indigenous culture and the \$10 a day childcare program, along with tourism, adding that, "This project also includes a market space, a band shell, a community kitchen and much more needed public washrooms." Hagar argued further that the project would have been a success because it had all the "right partners" at the table including members of council, Matheson and Hagar, members of staff, CAO David Stewart, the executive director of North Hastings Children's Services Jessica Anderson, Noreen Tinney a Kijicho Manito Madaouskarini Algonquin First Nation Elder, the CAO of Hastings County Connor Dorey, the head of Community and Human Services at the County Deborah Headley, and the CEO of the Hastings Highlands library Wendy Keating. Hagar finished by saying, "I can't stress enough about how sad it would be for our community to throw this project away at this point. If we don't take advantage of funding dollars another community will. And finally, the committee supporting this project has never asked for money, nor did we ever have any intention of using funds of our stakeholders through taxation for this project. We have always proceeded with the intention of applying for grant funding that we are hoping is going to come in the near future." Hagar also raised two issues, one of which was also mentioned by Anderson in her letter, that stirred consternation among some of the other councillors stating, "The past council supported the tear down of the old community centre only because we created this plan. Otherwise, that building would still be standing today." She echoed Anderson by stating, "Unfortunately, this committee found out that a community group was willing to donate a nice amount of money to this project but was politely turned down and it was never brought to the committee for discussion. This donation would have shown community support that is important for the success of grant applications." Matheson spoke next stating that "It is unfortunate that after extensive investigative and collaborative work under the direction of Jessica Anderson to provide a Native Centre, childcare facility, and community space at the former community centre location, that this project may not be moving forward. Personally, I was not in favour of the demolition of the old centre without a plan in place. With the needed support from Hastings County, the 2023 Directed Growth Plan identifying Hastings Highlands as a 'priority' and the critical partners in place, Jessica was excited to share the positive updates and provide background information for the new councillors. Unfortunately, council defeated the motion to approve the revised terms of reference before hearing the presentation from Jessica and as a result of this change in direction, and due to limited resources, they have had to discontinue leading the project. But, recognizing its value and importance, a commitment has been made to sit in an advisory position if council decides to move this project forward." Matheson then thanked Jessica and all the committee members for their participation adding that, "In my opinion this would enhance our municipality on several levels." Councillor Keith Buck, in response to Hagar's assertion about the tearing down of the old community centre, asked CAO David Stewart for clarification about why the building was torn down. Stewart responded, "I would have to look back at the reports from the operations manager, I don't have all that exact information in front of me. I know that there was something to do with hazardous materials at some point that were located within the facility." Buck then added, "That's my recollection too, that the building was not torn down because it was dormant or unused it

was because it was, as I recall, a health and safety issue. Buck went on to address the current project under discussion stating, 'This project was wonderful to hear when it first came on board. It was a big dream, had great community support, and had a great impact on our community, but it also came with a big dollar budget and we're struggling this year to pay what we need to pay to run our municipality, let alone to find money, and we're not going to find it from the government-so far. So, who pays?' Hagar responded, 'It was always determined that we were waiting for grant funding to come forward to support the federal government's mandate of \$10 a day childcare.' Councillor Roger Davis spoke next stating, 'It all sounds well and good, but waiting on funding from somewhere, as we know from everything else, it just doesn't happen. We're not getting that stuff coming down the pipe anymore. I think it's irresponsible to go ahead and state that 'we're waiting on funding' because more than likely in today's world it's not gonna happen.' Deputy Mayor Tammy Davis then gave her opinion on the committee saying that she was 'disappointed that Jessica chose to not come and speak to us because she could have provided a lot of clarification prior to this happening. [Anderson clarified to Bancroft This Week that she was out of town and unable to attend the March 20 meeting]. In her letter, I saw that she had written that we have also been advised that a major donation has been declined without committee consultation. I have no idea what she was talking about with that, and I don't know what I would even do with that. So, with the information that we have I feel that at this point it's in the best interest to dissolve the committee. [?] At this point I think it's a no-go with what's here.' Deputy Mayor Davis was not the only member of council confused by Anderson's and Hagar's references to a major donation being declined. Mayor Tony Fitzgerald was also perplexed by the reference, and it resulted in this exchange between Fitzgerald and Hagar: Fitzgerald: 'There is a reference in this letter that says, 'we have been advised that there has been a major contribution that has been declined without committee consultation,' and you just made reference to it again, and I would like you to enlighten us on that, because I never even heard a word about it and I'm the mayor, and it has not come to council that I'm aware of.' Hagar: 'Yes mayor, thank you. There was an offer made to support this project by a community group and we found out that it was declined before it came to the committee for any discussions. And I hate to say this, but, from the information I got, there was an email about the declining of funds and your name was copied in on it. I'm very sorry but?' Fitzgerald: 'That's very interesting because I didn't. So, this group, that you didn't identify, offered an amount of money that you didn't identify, and was declined by somebody you didn't identify.' Hagar: 'It was \$12,000.' Fitzgerald: 'Then who gave me this offer that I didn't know about?' Hagar: 'They weren't giving it to you, they were giving it to the community.' Fitzgerald: 'Well, this council represents the community and apparently none of us knew about this offer. You're mentioning it in a public meeting, so I think we should have some facts here to back this up.' Hagar: 'It was a donation made by the Maynooth Train Station Group that raised funds to put the roof on the train station that sent an email to offer the money.' Fitzgerald: 'That's interesting.' Hagar: 'I can resend you the email?' Fitzgerald: 'You can't, that's not how we deal with work, that's how other people deal with work. Here at council, we bring things properly to council.' Hagar: 'It wasn't brought to the committee.' Fitzgerald: 'It wasn't brought to us.' Hagar: 'It was brought to staff and then the reply to refuse it, your name was copied on it?' Fitzgerald: 'And who refused it?' Hagar: 'The CAO.' Fitzgerald: 'CAO Stewart refused the money for this specific project?' Hagar: 'That was the email copy that I got.' Fitzgerald: 'So, we're saying this in a public open meeting, I'm just gonna refer that?' Hagar: 'I didn't want to give too much information but?' Fitzgerald: 'Well you can't make references to vague things like this without being precise?' At this point Buck asked for a 'point of order' stating that he was 'having difficulty understanding the conversation' and asked for 'one speaker at a time,' to which Deputy Mayor Davis agreed. Fitzgerald then finished his closing statement by briefly reiterating earlier points from the meeting and asking, 'Where's the beef? Where's the money going to come from to build this?' Fitzgerald then referenced Anderson's letter regarding Hastings County CAO Connor Dorey and Deborah Headley, the head of Community and Human Services, stating, 'I spoke to both of those people yesterday, not for the first time, and they both reassured me again that there is no capital funding for this project or for any of these projects coming out [?].' Bancroft This Week reached out to Dorey for comment and he verified Fitzgerald's assertion stating, 'I can confirm that there is no capital funding available from upper levels of government for new construction of childcare centres. This information has been shared widely, and directly with individuals, including Mayor Fitzgerald,' he said, adding that, 'Childcare is a need in many communities across the country, including in Hastings County, however there are limited resources available in creating new spaces. This presents a challenge in being able to create new childcare spaces to meet the current demand.' Fitzgerald finished his closing statement by saying, 'So, without having some money we are twiddling our thumbs and wasting time, when this space could be better put to use moving forward with our farmer's market and upgrading our public washrooms next door.' Fitzgerald then read the motion once again, and at this point CAO Stewart raised his hand to speak and said, 'I take offence, my integrity's been questioned here, and I take offence to that. So, I would like to communicate to council that I just looked back in my emails and I did get an email from an individual who said they were representing the Maynooth Community Centre Project Committee and I responded back, I said, 'Staff presently have no formal direction set from council on this project so I, as staff, am not able to commit whether funds may or may

not be accepted for such a project.' So, that was my response and that was May 2, 2023. I would just like to clarify that for the record, thank you very much. Deputy Mayor Davis then called the question. Voting in favour of the motion was Fitzgerald, Davis, Davis, Neiman, and Buck, opposed was Hagar and Matheson. The motion passed. At the end of the meeting Hagar made a public apology to CAO Stewart stating, 'I would just like to publicly apologize to our CAO David Stewart. I have always stood by his integrity; I stood up for his integrity and I would never question his devotion to Hastings Highlands and again I publicly apologize to our CAO David Stewart.' Bancroft This Week reached out to Mayor Fitzgerald and Councillors Hagar and Matheson for comment but they had no comment.