

New warming centre concerns surrounding businesses



By Mike Riley

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

News of a new warming centre in downtown Bancroft on town property behind where McCaskie's used to be, has been met with much applause since it was announced last week. But some surrounding businesses, while they recognize how badly it's needed, are concerned about a potential variety of disruptions to their businesses, including potential safety and security issues, due to its location. Maggie's Resource Centre, which is right across the street from where the warming centre is slated to be erected on or before Dec. 15 has expressed concerns with its location. Deborah Headley, director of community and human services with Hastings County, says that Bancroft is working closely with the supplier of the portable warming centre to identify the best location (which has been chosen behind the McCaskie's building) and that they did an onsite consult on Nov. 28, and they're looking to move the unit there as quickly as possible. "The warming centre will be supervised by security as it has in the past. [It] is very impressive, and includes a staff office, four sleeping units which will be converted into open space for the purposes of the warming centre as well as two washrooms. The unit is designed to move locations and has hydro hook up services and holding tanks for water and sewer if needed," she says. Deb Jeffrey, a social justice advocate in Bancroft, who has long been involved in addressing social issues as a volunteer, including volunteering for the morning shift at the warming centre last year, says that she's relieved and thankful to Bancroft council for putting the portable building in place and for the location chosen. "This decision will save lives and prevent some cold related injuries, most importantly, but will also reduce visits to the emergency room by unhoused people and many attendant emergency service costs. We live in a caring community and I am confident more and more people will rally to the cause when they come to understand the gravity and inhumanity of the current situation. I can also say that volunteer work in our school system is a huge factor in waking me up to the urgency of addressing homelessness. Many of the unhoused individuals that I know now in our community, I first met when they were children at school. That knowledge drives home to me that they are human beings in trouble, but have great potential and need our support," she says. Kim McMunn, executive director of Maggie's Resource Centre,

and Cheryl Easton, who sits on Maggie's board of directors, expressed some concerns about the intended location of the warming centre behind where McCaskie's used to be. Specifically, they're concerned about their clients, who are escaping violent and abusive relationships, some of whom will be living on site in their transitional housing units at the beginning of next year. 'We've been working for the past few months at making it safe for those that are staying here, those that are working here and for the community around us,' says McMunn. Easton agrees, saying they've built in protocols, policies and safety features as they want the people who live in transitional housing at Maggie's to not only be safe, secure and warm, because they're protecting them, but by having them on site, they don't want to infringe on their neighbours. Easton emphasizes their clients are highly vulnerable, and Maggie's mandate is to provide resources to victims of violence, and to protect them from violence or any triggering exterior factors. 'It feels a little counter-productive that we may be bringing in people, and I'm not saying all homeless are violent, but there are behaviours, especially if drugs are involved, that come with that, that may put our women at risk,' she says. Easton says the new warming centre location definitely affects Maggie's safety and security plan going forward. 'We are forced to increase it. Because we have vulnerable people living here and frequenting here, we're forced to have a more robust safety plan, which translates into an extra expense for us,' she says. However, both McMunn and Easton emphasize they're not against a warming centre and it has to happen, and McMunn says you have to have a place for people to go. 'That's paramount. You would not want anybody out in the cold. But in that same token, we are hoping that they have that health, safety and security piece in place. That's our key concern,' she says. A representative for another business in the vicinity, who did not wish to be identified, says they have care and concern for Maggie's clients and they'll in turn remain super vigilant and do what they can to ensure they remain safe. 'The town is doing the best they can, in a situation that really isn't theirs to handle, so I have compassion for what they are attempting to do and a heart for those who are homeless. It's such a contentious issue, I just don't want to insert any negativity into this. Everyone is trying so hard, so we will try to,' she says. Andra Kauffeldt, general manager for the Town of Bancroft, says the town has historically worked with Hastings County to operate a warming room at their previously town owned building at 24 Flint Avenue for the 2021/2022 winter season. 'There were no issues with public safety outside of the normal operating hours for the warm room when it was held at this location,' she says. Kauffeldt says that the town believes that all their residents deserve a warm place to go at night to get out of the winter cold. 'We have many vulnerable populations in our community and strive to ensure we can support them all to the best of our ability,' she says. Bancroft Mayor Paul Jenkins told Bancroft This Week that the warming centre would be in place by Dec. 15, possibly a little sooner. He reiterates there'll be security inside and they're working in tandem with the OPP, who'll be doing patrols in the area. 'But just because of the shape of our town, there's really nowhere you can put it that's not going to be adjacent to something. We've got a long narrow ribbon of town. A couple of the churches attempted to get it, one of them was St. John's [Anglican Church] and they were all unsuccessful. So, this was sort of a last minute 'Hail Mary.' We've been working since spring to get land from the province at the south end of town. But that was a frustrating experience and we ended up not being able to locate it on provincial land. So, we did look at other options, and we'll continue to look for other options and hopefully in the next year or so we'll find another spot for it to relocate to,' he says. Jenkins stresses that this is not the solution to the homelessness problem, but a stopgap measure. 'We continue to work on other housing options, but they're going to take time. There's no question about that,' he says. While he said there was some communication about this initiative via the news media and feedback solicited at an open house held by St. John's with the town and neighbours present, Jenkins said there really was no option and they couldn't just leave the homeless outside to freeze to death in the cold. 'No matter where you go, somebody's going to have an issue. So, this was really the only place that was available to us at this time.'