

Public meets, discusses fear of wastewater hikes

By Sarah Sobanski

A report on public concerns and ideas for Bancroft's doubled wastewater rates is being developed.

A public meeting for local business owners and North Hastings residents was held by a number of community organizations and businesses March 1 at the Bancroft Legion.

"We need this as documentation that we cannot afford this increase," said North Hastings Community Trust program co-ordinator Jane Kali at the meeting. She suggested the information from the event would be brought to council.

Attendees were first introduced to a timeline developed by a volunteer planning committee detailing what has led to the town's need to increase rates. It dated back more than a decade. They were also given 10 key points to know about the rate increase and seven options to be considered as possible solutions to the increase.

With everyone brought up to speed, community members sat down in groups with facilitators to record their concerns.

At the table where *Bancroft This Week* was seated locals were focused on a solution or lack thereof. One man concluded that the only way to fix the problem was to have someone donate \$2 million to the town's wastewater debt. Another was convinced there was no way around the increase and that because of it, increases would soon be seen elsewhere in town to account for wastewater bills. This could mean increases in rent or businesses moving out of town or raising their prices.

"There's already empty storefronts," said a woman wondering what this would mean for the town's main street. The table was also concerned about the employment rate. Stores might need to let people go in order to make up for their additional costs.

"Anybody that lives outside of town and has to come here [will also be impacted]," said a man who comes to town to do his laundry. He also noted cottagers and campers who come into town for services. It started a conversation about how wide the impact could be.

"We have an amazing volunteer community. You're going to see less volunteers because people can't afford to volunteer. Think of all the things that have volunteers in this town."

One man wanted more data, "[There's a] deficit of information."

It raised the question of how different property owners would be impacted. What are the actual numbers? What is the difference between a family of four paying wastewater and a senior's household? What are the costs to a single person living in an apartment? How would vulnerable populations be impacted?

The man added, "You can quantify the damage."

While in transition to the next exercise, Kali clarified that the public was aware that the damage would be significant to everyone. A woman from the crowd living in low-income housing said her bill was more than her rent before the increase. The event was about putting together a collective voice of concern to bring forward.

The next exercise saw community members sharing ideas to solve the wastewater issue.

The 10th item on the pamphlet outlining things to know on the issue by the planning committee stated: "There may be other solutions to the problem, in addition to or instead of the current increase. As a town, we're pursuing some of those solutions already."

The listed solutions included council inviting proposals from other companies to run its plant more economically, commissioning a camera study on the wastewater lines, decommissioning parts of the wastewater plant in order to reduce costs, selling town assets, generating additional revenue from town assets and becoming more politically aggressive when bringing the municipality's problems to the province.

"The information that we had there were a few people researching, that was Dianne Eastman, Harold Eastman and Bill Kilpatrick did a lot of digging," said Kali. "They did all that work and then summarized it in a way for other people to understand."

The pamphlet also noted that prepared material was based on available information at the time and was accurate to the best knowledge of the planning committee. There was a disclaimer that the information was meant as a discussion piece and could contain errors. Information was developed from documents including the "Town of Bancroft Water and Wastewater Asset Management Plan" by Watson and Associates, "Watertight: the case for change in Ontario's water and wastewater sector" by the province's Water Strategy Expert Panel, and a Canadian Environmental Law Association's public report titled "Water services in Ontario."

"We thought the response was awesome. We got really good feedback from folks. Comments like I came in here afraid and I left less afraid. I think the energy in the room and the collective responsibility really lifted people's spirits and gave people hope that we can tackle this because it's a complex problem. I feel like this really set the stage for collaboration and creative problem solving," said Kali.