

Quarry conversations resume with coming proposal

By Sarah Sobanski

Community business leaders are concerned they're being left out of the Freymond quarry conversation.

The next Freymond quarry proposal will be brought before the County of Hastings by this fall. The proposal was originally thought to be coming out by spring of this year.

Year-round local residents are wary that their voice will be weaker in the fall. The timing falls after most cottagers will have returned to their winter homes. It will be harder for them to come to public meetings and consultations for the quarry because of the commute.

"When the application process began last spring, there was quite a bit of initial activity. There was a huge turnout at the open house to discuss and announce the role of [the quarry]," said Grail Springs program manager Barb Shaw, explaining the spike in community interest for Freymond's first proposal. "Last summer, a number of the cottage groups and lake associations that would be directly impacted by this development were quite vocal. There were tables set up in downtown Bancroft, and then the whole process stopped."

When the Freymond quarry went back to the drawing board for its official plan, groups both against the quarry, and looking to ensure due diligence for the quarry's planning, were left in the dark.

Controversy was sparked last year on June 25 at a public meeting held between community members and previous organizers EcoVue Consulting Services Inc. Many attendees left the meeting feeling their questions had gone unanswered. The group was blamed for not sharing their information efficiently with other interested parties.

Since the meeting, the proposal has had to be redone. Waiting for the next proposal has community members anxious for more information.

"The first time I heard about it there was an immediate emotional response, like oh my God, what does this mean? I need information," said Grail Springs founder Madeleine Marentette. "The consultants had said we are in the blast radius."

When Marentette first came to the area to build Grail Springs she didn't run into much wildlife. She said the quiet in the forest was unusual.

"All of the sudden the ground shakes and you hear a rumble, and I didn't know what it was," remembered Marentette. She later found out there was a marble quarry on Spurr Lake. She blamed the rumble she felt on the quarry.

"When I had arrived here and spent a lot of time surveying, I noticed there was no wildlife. I said we have no wildlife because of the blasting that has been going on here for years."

She added that wildlife returned after the quarry was shut down.

"It took about seven years before the wildlife came back. We are abundant with wildlife, grouse and pheasant and deer and fox ? they're all here."

One of Marentette's many concerns is that the wildlife will vacate the area again if another quarry develops in the area. She said county residents move to the area for a lifestyle that brings them close to nature.

Marentette and Shaw have teamed up with retired economist of Prism Economics Bill Empey, in an attempt to better understand what concerns are valid amongst the flurry of rumours surrounding the quarry. They've had to take matters into their own hands.

"When this application goes in, the municipality does not provide us with an advocate, the county does not provide us with an advocate," said Shaw. She explained the business making the proposal hires consultants ? someone to guide them through the process of moving its proposal forward ? but concerned community groups don't have access to a formal representative.

"There is nobody to guide us through the process except for consultants who have been hired on the other side. Based on the first round, they said there would be a severe impact," said Shaw.

A major concern for Empey is that property values could be impacted due to proximity to the quarry.

"I brought to their attention several studies, one in particular on Ontario properties in the proximity of quarry and proposed quarries. That study documents, as many others do, the loss in value associated with proximity to the quarry," said Empey. "There's many different studies, it's not guaranteed that prices will fall, but there's lots of evidence of looking at matters like [sworn valuation](#) values as well as actual real estate transactions that document the decline of property values and it depends on the distance from the quarry." The evidence seems quite clear in this case, though there is still no guarantee that what is predicted will happen.

In working with Empey, Shaw and Marentette have begun the process of working with the [Municipal Property Assessment Corporation](#) (MPAC) for Grail Springs, other businesses and real estate owners who are within a two kilometre and five kilometre radius of the proposed quarry site.

"The MPAC assessment is a way to say you're impacting me and lowering my property values," said Shaw. "So if you're lowering my property values I want MPAC to know because then I should be able to pay you less through my taxes. That is a way of communicating directly with the municipality to say there is an impact here."

Empey suggested that property values have decreased as much as 10 per cent for real estate owners within two and five kilometres of other Ontario quarries. He is helping concerned community groups develop a critical path to follow the quarry proposal and to later respond to it.

Shaw wants the MPAC assessment to open up a dialogue with the municipality for when the quarry proposal is presented. It is hard, however, to begin the dialogue when the quarry proposal has not officially been presented.

"I think appealing the assessments is one step, and going ahead with our own research and gathering data. Just so when the application does go in we are in a better position to have a calm, intellectual, knowledgeable conversation about what's happening and what the impact will be," said Shaw.

A website has been created at www.quarg.ca by some of the concerned property owners.