

Raising the bar



By Nate Smelle

DURING THE JAN. 21 meeting of council in Hastings Highlands Mayor Vivian Bloom described an encounter with an elderly resident of the municipality has been having difficulty with keeping the hydro on and food in the fridge. It was obvious that this meeting had affected her by the seriousness in her voice as she shared the story with all those in the room.

It saddened me greatly to think of how our society fails our elders.

What message does this send to future generations? If it is OK for us to neglect the generations that came before us, is it also OK for the next generation to do the same?

What saddened me even more about Bloom's story was the fact that I also recently experienced a similar encounter. While in the office one day an elderly woman living alone in L'Amable dropped by to tell me about how the system was leaving her and others behind.

She told me about how this was not what she had envisioned when she dreamt of retirement as a young working woman. She told me about how difficult it is for her to keep the heat on as the costs of living continue to climb higher than her fixed-income can reach. What got to me most was when she spoke of her hunger and how she could not afford to eat the healthy food her doctor had

recommended to her.

During the same council meeting a report was delivered to council entitled *The Real Cost of Eating Well in Hastings and Prince Edward Counties* by the Hastings and Prince Edward Counties Health Unit. The intent of this report was to increase the awareness of families and individuals living on low incomes who cannot afford a basic nutritious diet. The data this study put forth was both enlightening and disturbing.

The report showed how the weekly cost of groceries for a family of four living in Hastings and Prince Edward Counties has increased by 14 per cent in the past five years. Have working-class wages gone up 14 per cent in the past five years? When the cost of living goes up but our wages don't, does that mean we need to eat 14 per cent less food, or do we just start eating food that is 14 per cent less nutritious?

The World Health Organization calls poverty the greatest determinate of human health. Therefore, how much money someones family has access to, directly relates to how long they live, how healthy they live, and how able these people are to contribute to their community.

It is common knowledge that most people who are hungry don't usually worry about the quality of the food they are eating. When people are able to eat and live healthier this reduces costs upon the healthcare system, which in turn translates into a healthier economy.

What happened to this great wave of Canadian prosperity we have been promised over the last decade? Has your quality of life improved by 14 per cent or does your debt continue to grow as the loonie falls?

The story Mayor Bloom shared during the last council meeting in Hastings Highlands is a sign of the times, a warning that indicates to us that we cannot afford to strip down our social services any more.

The Ontario Public Service Employees Union workers are taking a stand now to show that their contribution to the communal good is something we need to value. Yes their wages and benefits are higher than the majority of the local work force throughout North Hastings, but this does not mean we have the right to take away their gains.

None of us will benefit from lowering the bar any further.