

Revitalize area tourism as a priority

By Sherwood Hines

I'm up on the Eagles Nest. It's a spectacularly warm and sunny September afternoon. Tourists visiting from Oshawa ask that I give them some directions. They are up here for two weeks of rest and relaxation, and want to know about the local restaurants, coffee shops, and such.

They ask me if there are other local natural sites they should visit.

I explain that if they take the South Baptiste Road, and look very carefully, they will see a small sign for High Falls Road. At the end of that road, they will find a magical little waterfall that tumbles and roars.

Or, if they take Hwy 28E, and again look closely, they will see a very small yellow sign for Egan Shute Provincial Park. But, if they go as far as the York River Bridge, then they've gone too far.

If you aren't from here, these places are practically impossible to find. The signage is awful.

I'm not sure why Bancroft hasn't put the time into accommodating tourists, especially given the money they inject into this region.

Sure, back in the good ol' days when we had the mines, and the logging, and the big regional government offices, we could look down our noses at places like Haliburton, who were trying all sorts of tricks to lure the tourists to their town.

But the mines are long gone, employment in the logging industry has dropped 80 per cent in the last decade, Mike Harris contracted the size of the government offices down to about 20 per cent of what they used to be, and schools and banks are closing all around us.

Do the village elders who run the town still think we're living in 1981? They seem to act like it.

At a recent networking initiative of local small businesses, every local politician as well as the chamber of commerce was invited to come hear what 50 small local business owners had to say about trying to run a business in the Bancroft region. Only Councillor Kilpatrick showed up.

The overwhelming complaint was the indifference and obstructions small business owners received from the town bureaucracy.

(Their second biggest question: what exactly does the local chamber of commerce do?)

I came back to Bancroft, after being away for almost 30 years, which gives one a unique insider/outsider take on what is happening here.

Statistics Canada reports that rural regions of Ontario are aging rapidly, with approximately 15 per cent of the population under the age of 19.

We are an old town, living on old ways.

But if Bancroft is to economically survive, new ways of doing things needs to be embraced. Community gardening initiatives, tiny homes, new business start up supports, downtown revitalization, tourist advertising. The town needs to begin to embrace these movements.

What can Bancroft be that will attract new people to the area?

Despite the fact that a 2010 PKF Consulting paper pegged local tourist spending at about \$20 million annually, according to surveys done by the county, 68 per cent of people say they only heard of Bancroft through word-of-mouth.

Why? Because we put off this reluctance to embrace tourists. We fear for our autonomy, of preserving the old ways we do things around here, of having Toronto-centric political decisions made that go against local plans.

Those are real fears. But somewhere between totally disregarding tourists and selling our soul to the devil lay a future economic strategy for Bancroft. It is in replicating best practices in grow/shop local economics, in updated bylaws that address the tiny home movement, it is in progressive taxation policies that will bring new business to the region. It is about some simple signage that will guide tourists to some of the truly magnificent natural resources we have around here.

Unfortunately, if you ask our local council to look at their five or 10 year strategic plan for Bancroft, you will discover that they do not have one.

Why look to the future, when you are still living in the past?