

SABA questions township's community engagement



By Michael Riley

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

The South Algonquin Business Alliance sent a letter to South Algonquin Township council that was included in the agenda package for their Jan. 15 council meeting. Dated Jan. 6, SABA's letter by chair Dr. Angela Pollak, questioned community engagement by the township and suggested how to enhance it. Council responded to the Jan. 6 letter and discussed it at their Jan. 15 meeting. Pollak responded to council's comments after the meeting.

SABA's Pollak expressed concerns with community engagement in an earlier letter from Nov. 6, commending council on continuing the livestreaming of council and committee meetings and pointing out some broken links and minutes not being posted on the township website, which Mayor Ethel LaValley replied to via email on Nov. 22, thanking her for pointing them out and saying that transitioning to a new software system and being short-staffed led to these issues and that they were being rectified. She also asked SABA to keep pointing any issues out so they could be dealt with promptly.

In the Jan. 6 letter, Pollak said they were writing to share ongoing concerns regarding the township's approach to community engagement, evidenced most recently through the process followed for the development of the Economic Development and Tourism Strategy, but also experienced through the current approach to tabling and passing bylaws, and drafts of work prepared by consultants for community and industry feedback or scrutiny, except as part of the agenda package for the meeting where it's tabled for council approval.

'While we understand, and share, the challenges of finite resources and limited staff capacity, it is our belief that robust, meaningful, and transparent processes for community engagement and consultation would create more efficiency, reduce administrative burden in the long term, and support more productive and collaborative relationships within our community. We believe that it is not the intent of council or staff to exclude community members from fully participating in decisions that deeply affect them. However, the current approach to community engagement and consultation would benefit from a thoughtful transformation. It is our belief that we have the shared goal of fostering open and collaborative relationships between council, staff, and community organizations and individuals, and we are concerned that the current approach does not support this goal,' she says.

Pollak went on to say that while it may be technically allowed or within 'the letter of the law' regarding legislative requirements, the current approach to consultation provides neither the appearance nor felt experience of true community engagement.

?Decisions about who is invited to participate in important processes like the Economic Development and Tourism plan development, and other processes like it, often feel opaque and arbitrary, at best, and sometimes appear actively hostile to certain community organizations and individuals, at worst. We would like to believe that this is not the intent of Council or staff, and that hearing this feedback will be as concerning to the Township as it is to community organizations like the South Algonquin Business Alliance. Our members have expressed concerns about the inclusivity of the community engagement process, noting limited (if any) attention given to diversity of participants across gender, economic sector, socioeconomic status, cultural identity, and other critical demographic factors. Our members have also expressed concerns about being explicitly discouraged from participating, either through being directly told they could not attend community engagement meetings or through confusing and indirect communication about the process itself,? she says.

Pollak said that while they know that Ontario municipalities are not legally required to receive or post correspondence from the public, many municipalities have designed their procedural bylaws to support transparent communication.

?We strongly believe that the township's current procedural by-law would benefit from greater attention to the handling of correspondence, including specific explanations for when, why, and how correspondence is included as part of Council agenda packages, as the current version only specifies the order in which correspondence may be presented, but not any provisions for how it is determined whether correspondence will or will not be included in the agenda package. Such review and revision could, and should, be part of an overall review of community engagement, consultation, and communication practices by the township. These dynamics may not be by design, but the end result is the same as if they were purposefully undertaken, and we believe it would be to everyone's benefit if the township reviewed and adopted more robust community engagement practices,? she says.

The full letter can be found in the Jan. 15 agenda package at www.southalgonquin.ca.

After SABA's letter was introduced at the Jan. 15 meeting and after Mayor Ethel LaValley asked for discussion, Councillor Joan Kuiack and Councillor Sean Pigeon disagreed with SABA's assessment of the lack of community engagement, asserting that this had been done quite well with the Economic Development and Tourism Plan, which Pigeon asserted had five SABA members present for the workshops, which he said were well attended and went absolutely well, and the Short-Term Rentals Licencing Accommodation Bylaw that had a well-attended open house on Nov. 21.

Regarding the current approach to tabling and passing bylaws brought up by Pollak, Councillor Joe Florent said that most if not all the bylaws come up from the committee level and they're discussed around the table before they're brought to council and that all those committee meetings are open to the public. However, he agreed with Pollak that major bylaws like the budget should not be done in a single meeting but several meetings for optimal public input.

?On the budget, I just want to ensure there's opportunity for public comment, whatever we have to do to make sure that happens,? he says.

CAO Bryan Martin concurred that the bylaws that come to council that council as committee of the whole has already had their debate and been prepared before they make it to the council table.

?And it's not even mandatory to have three readings anymore. I can remember the days when we physically read every bylaw from start to finish and we read them three times at three separate meetings and it took three months to pass a bylaw. Today, I don't know that there's a municipality and I could be wrong, but very few municipalities, that are not reading bylaws in a similar manner. And when there are bylaws that council need further discussion, they can pull it out and deal with it separately. But something like our confirmation bylaw, do you need two or three readings for it? No. All it does is slow down council process, so that now instead of being enacting something you've dealt with as committee of the whole, and you do act as a committee of the whole, it delays it now so you're a couple of months passing things. So, it just slows down government. I don't think that's the intention of what we do,? he says.

Martin reiterated that anytime a bylaw has been put into a council agenda package it's been worked on by committee at least a

couple of times.

?Council is the approval authority and committee are recommending it. It would be different if there was only one or two of you on the committee, but all seven of you sit on committee,? he says.

Kuiack stressed that the public has to realize that most of the work is done at the committee level and by the time they're looking at the regular council meeting, it's already been discussed and they haven't paid attention to the committee meetings and thus don't realize the work that's gone on at the committee level.

?I think if the public was interested in knowing what bylaws were being worked on, they should be looking at the committee level, read it, talk about it, get ahold of one of us if they feel they need some input to it so that when it does come to council, we could have further discussion if we felt that was required,? she says.

Martin said that when they do get comments on bylaws when they're at committee, the comments are always included in council's packages so they can give consideration to them.

?Just because council chooses or chooses not to give consideration, does not mean the information was not provided,? he says.

Pollak told The Bancroft Times on Jan. 22 that public engagement in local government can range from meeting basic legal rules to following best practices like those from the International Association for Public Participation (www.iap2.org/) She asserts that meeting the minimum means doing only what the law requires while best practices focus on transparency, fairness, and outcomes. She says that better public engagement tends to lead to better outcomes. She said that between June 19 and Oct. 2, 2024, council spent less than three minutes discussing the Tourism & Economic Development Master Plan in public meetings, and asserts that council did not review the RFP or discuss the winning proposal publicly, yet they approved a ?First Impressions Tourism? test, and authorized undercover mystery shoppers to attend and rate private businesses in our community, their premises and their employee customer service without their knowledge, consent or notice. She says that businesses were not invited to comment on the process and couldn't opt out, and that attendance at workshops was by invitation only, with most invitees representing government interests.

?Councillors Kuiack and Pigeon suggested this process meets the minimum requirements for public consultation,? she says. ?Even if we suspend disbelief for a moment and assume that to be true, the process did not feel transparent, fair, or public, which means the point our councillors may be missing is whether meeting just the minimum is enough for people in our community to thrive on.?