

Someone left the water on

By Tony Pearson

Bancroft has known for a couple of years that it has a serious problem dealing with its sewer water. The amount it is paying to the Ontario Clear Water Agency (OCWA) to treat its wastewater every year is about half a million dollars more than it is collecting in fees from those on the sewer system. This is driving the township deeper and deeper into debt. By next year, the debt is expected to soar well over the \$2 million mark. It's a cost level that threatens to erode the town's future ability to pay its bills.

To forestall such a financial crisis, Bancroft council set up a committee including experts in water and sewage management.

Last week, the committee learned more about the wastewater situation. There are two plants, not one, treating wastewater. A lot of what's being treated appears to be rainwater and river water infiltrating the sewer lines (the volume being treated spikes during the spring run-off). A part of the cost is massive increases in hydro charges that don't seem related in any way to the amount of wastewater being treated. The unit cost of treatment has increased four-fold in the past 15 years, although the amount being treated has been fairly stable. The OCWA has reduced its level of service.

On top of that, the committee also learned that it is possible that the town is being charged twice to treat the same sewage. There's a similar gap in the finances of the water system.

About 40 per cent of the water being pumped out to the town never reaches the homes, and businesses, on the town's water lines. The main implication of this finding is that town water users have been, and continue to be, overcharged for their water use.

To sum up, OCWA is charging Bancroft for more water than the town is actually using, as well as charging to treat more wastewater than the town houses and shops discharge.

In at least one year, when OCWA provided detailed accounting, the total was higher than the sub-totals combined. (OCWA hasn't provided detailed billing for the last three or four years.)

Works manager Perry Kelly reported that he is waiting for the go-ahead to begin putting cameras into the water and sewer lines to try to find where water is leaking in or out of the town pipes.

?I'm convinced there's a lot of infiltration. We need the camera work to identify them,? said Kelly.

Don Taylor, the now-retired town employee who first alerted council and the public to the growing sewer financial drain, said that the town should return to its old model and manage its water and wastewater systems itself.

The town warned its ratepayers in the most recent tax bill that neither their sump pumps, nor their downspouts, should flow into the sewer system. If they do, the owners should alert the town office. OCWA has been notified that the next contract for water and wastewater management will be put out to public bidding.