

South Algonquin businesses benefit from Enabling Accessibility Fund



By Michael Riley

Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

Angela Pollak, the secretary with the South Algonquin Business Alliance and the owner and manager at Four Corners Algonquin (which provides camping, glamping and tiny house accommodations), informed The Bancroft Times that seven businesses in South Algonquin had been approved for Enabling Accessibility Fund grants totaling nearly \$500,000 for projects to improve accessibility at those organizations going forward, including her own. There was an event on Oct. 19 from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. featuring the Ontario Minister of Seniors and Accessibility Raymond Cho, and other dignitaries, a luncheon and a tour of the facilities that have been made more accessible with the EAF funding, including Four Corners Algonquin. According to Pollak, the day's event went extremely well.

Pollak says she's been working with the South Algonquin community since 2018, helping people write grant applications for different grant projects. This was a service she provided free of charge, as she saw it as important for community development and progress. Pollak invites any local businesses that wish to pursue any grants to get in touch with her through SABA [mysouthalgonquin.ca/SABA] at workingmom@rogers.com, or through Four Corners Algonquin [fourcornersalgonquin.ca] fourcornersalgonquin@rogers.com.

The EAF grants have been very successful in South Algonquin, according to Pollak. After she got her first grant through, she says she opened it up to the community.

?We did a couple of grant writing workshops to help them understand what the process was like and then I worked closely with a number of people over two application cycles to start applying for these grants. So, we've had really amazing success,? she says.

According to the Canada.ca website that provides information on the EAF, it provides funding for projects that make communities and workplaces across the country more accessible for persons with disabilities, allowing them more opportunities to partake in community activities, programs and services and to access employment. There are three different funding streams for the EAF; the youth innovation component for funding up to \$10,000, the small project component with funding up to \$100,000 and the mid-sized project component, with funding available up to \$3 million. New this year, the website has a flow chart for people to choose the accessibility component funding that is right for their project.

Pollak says that a whole bunch of businesses that thought they'd been rejected for EAF funding initially, subsequently got word recently that their funding applications had been approved. This funding has led to a wide range of projects to improve accessibility in the municipality at these local businesses; an accessible comfort station, beach and trail accessible wheelchairs, adaptive bicycles, renovations to two local motels, a portable bathroom to allow one of the businesses to open up an accessible campground, an upgraded outdoor kitchen, an accessible bathroom and paving upgrades, and accessible automatic doors.

With that kind of success and subsequent construction to enhance accessibility in the township, Minister Cho paid a visit to South Algonquin on Oct. 19, to say a few words about the strides South Algonquin had made with the EAF funding, participate in the meet and greet luncheon afterwards, which featured food provided by The Mad Musher, Four Corners Algonquin, Tania Jermol, Martin's Apples and Len and Patty's Butcher Block. There was also a tour of the businesses that have made these accessibility modifications with the EAF grant funding in Whitney and Madawaska like Four Seasons Algonquin Cabins, Four Corners Algonquin, Camp Bongopix, Rolling Rapids Motel, Eastgate Motel and Bellwood Inn. It is also fortuitous that October happens to be Provincial Accessibility Month in Ontario. In addition, MPP John Yakabuski and MP Cheryl Gallant and South Algonquin Councillor Bongo Bongo were on hand and spoke about the township's work to improve accessibility. The Federal Minister of Youth, Diversity and Inclusion Bardish Chagger was unable to attend but forwarded a video message congratulating them on their efforts. South Algonquin Business Alliance chair Gabriella Hairbedian, Explorers' Edge/Great Canadian Wilderness/RTO12's James Murphy, South Algonquin CAO/clerk-treasurer Bryan Martin and South Algonquin Councillors Richard Shalla, Joe Florent and Bill Rodnick were all there to show support.

Pollak says that most of South Algonquin's infrastructure predates accessibility standards in building codes, so it's very difficult for small businesses, many of them mom and pop operations who operate on a seasonal basis, to make these upgrades. So, getting this grant money was a real opportunity for them.

Pollak told The Bancroft Times after the event that she was really pleased with how the day went and that they'd gotten lots of positive feedback. She said that about 40 people, from the community and all levels of government, turned out for the lunch and the officials' speeches at Four Corners Algonquin.

"I think the tour of our local businesses who benefitted from this grant money was a real highlight of the day because it showed the multi-layered impact funding has in the moment and into the future," she says.

Pollak says the businesses that got the EAF funding learned that the simple act of making space easier to access has a whole range of economic impacts; when more people can use a space, jobs are maintained and created and that she can even count off two new spin off businesses for the community coming on the horizon. She said it increases financial and social resilience in the community which will benefit the township through increased taxation, and ultimately elevates the appeal of South Algonquin as a destination.

"It's really exciting to be at the centre of such a good news story about what can happen when all three levels of government work together with the community toward a common goal. When we raise the tide like this, all boats float higher and that's a win no matter which angle you look at it from. It's really hard to knock what our community and SABA has accomplished here and I'm really proud of my neighbours and colleagues. SABA is hopeful that the publicity generated from this event will mean more businesses will be open to participating and that more opportunities come our way," she says. "We're ready to engage and build on our success."