

Taking community groups for grant(ed)

By Tony Pearson

Lately, a certain ill temper has crept into the discussions at Bancroft Council, centred around grants and donations to various community groups. What before tended to pass quickly, became this year the subject of much heated debate, as well as a fair helping of confusion.

Some contributions are both small and of long standing ? for example, \$250 to the North Hastings Music Festival. Others are larger, but again, of long standing, such as the \$7,500 for the TROUT community transportation system.

This year, councillors wrangled quite a bit over some of the grants. The \$15,000 which the Bancroft and District Chamber of Commerce normally receives to operate a tourist information centre for the town, was cut back to \$4,000. On the other hand, there were increases. The Wheels, Water and Wings Festival went from \$3,000 to \$6,000 (plus another \$3,000 in extra town costs for traffic control), and the museum received an additional \$12,000. There were also new grants, such as \$5,000 to the Saw-Tech exhibition.

One upshot of the wrangling was a motion to cease all community grants in future years. With the support of four out of the seven councillors, this motion passed. But its meaning is far from clear.

For example, a distinction was suggested between grants and economic development investments. So while money given to the Art Gallery might be termed a gift, the \$9,000 given to Wheels/Water/Wings could be deemed an investment.

The issue was further clouded by the notion of in-kind contributions. Normally, that's where the town contributes its facilities, or has event work done by town employees during the regular work day. But sometimes the town incurs extra expenses by paying its employees overtime for event work. Thus the outright donation of \$5,000 to the Rally of the Tall Pines is boosted by at least \$7,500 which the town pays to help set up the rally. As this is outright spending, it can't be called in-kind ? but some do, to allow it to fall outside the grant ban.

Confused? OK, now let's turn back to the use of town facilities, like Millennium Park. Recently, Council was asked if they would forego charging rent for the amateur Bancroft Theatre Guild's use of the park for their traditional 24-hour theatre. The Guild is using the park because their long-time home, the Village Playhouse, suddenly became unavailable to them. This performance will be free, with those attending asked to make contributions to the Food Bank or to the Community Trust.

However, the anti-grant group of four councillors denied the request, claiming that every organization who uses the park should pay. Later, they reversed themselves and voted to allow free use of the park to the regular Mineral Capital concerts. Asked by the Mayor to make a uniform policy by allowing the Guild its request, the four refused to reconsider.

Noises were made about charging everybody next year. Does this include the Relay for Life, who just raised \$87,000 to help cancer sufferers? Does it include this fall's Terry Fox run, or the Colours Run, both of which also raise money for charitable causes?

And what about the North Hastings Children's Services, which took over the running of a children's summer camp in the park at the town's request? During budget debates, calls were made to charge Children's Services for all kids who don't actually live in Bancroft. Perhaps next year, the town will charge outside kids using the skatepark. Perhaps the non-Bancroft kids visiting Santa Claus at his Riverside Park house should also pay a fee. Heck, why not set up toll booths to get into the parks?

To charge volunteer community groups for public facilities verges on mean-spiritedness ? especially when the rules are confused. One group of volunteers putting on free concerts for the pleasure of residents and visitors gets the bandstand free of charge, because it's termed economic development. Another group of volunteers puts on a free evening of locally-written and locally-performed plays for the pleasure of residents and visitors ? and it's an event for which full costs should be charged, on the principle of no free

lunches.

It's worth bearing in mind that granting use of town parks costs the township next to nothing. All groups promise to clean up and leave the place just as it was. A facility which would otherwise lie idle gets some use.

Shouldn't the town encourage groups to make use of the facilities the town has paid to build? Council proclaims its desire for community events, and its support for community volunteers. But if volunteers are going to be charged for putting on events which draw people to town facilities, they may think twice in future.

It seems like Council should get their act together and set some guidelines that all groups can follow ? and more important, which Council can apply in a consistent manner, without the appearance of favouritism: ?Yes, we like you; no, we don't like you.? As the old adage has it, what's sauce for the goose should also be sauce for the gander.