

The problem with painting by numbers

By Nate Smelle

Whenever I read an article where there are almost as many numbers as there are words, my BS detector immediately goes off. Not because I have an aversion to mathematics or a fear of calculators, but because numbers can be easily spun to add credibility to one point of view, or strip it away from another. Another reason I am skeptical of reading and writing such articles is that they are often misinterpreted by even the keenest of observers. Crunching the numbers while putting together the piece on the auditor's report for the Town of Bancroft, I had to pause on more than a few occasions to give a little extra time and care to how the blend of digits and letters would and could be understood.

For the most part, the assets, liabilities and expenditures documented in the report spoke for themselves. On the other hand, the comparative analysis measuring Bancroft's finances against six similar municipalities left ample room for interpretation. Prior to presenting the comparison Joanna Park of Collins Barrow Chartered Accountants cautioned council to take the statistics with a grain of salt, because the analysis did not address the unique circumstances of each community.

Along with Bancroft, the auditors looked at the municipalities of Marmora and Lake, Centre Hastings, Stirling-Rawdon, North Kawartha, Havelock-Belmont-Methuen and Asphold-Norwood. As was pointed out during the presentation, all seven of these lower-tier municipalities have a similar number of households and population, their own water and wastewater systems and a similar taxation base that is primarily residential. Having spent time in all seven, it is also true that they all have a certain something that differentiates them from the urban malaise spreading out in all directions from the GTA.

Drawing attention to the fact Bancroft has the highest municipal debt per capita of all seven municipalities at \$2,075, the graphs in this section of the report were telling regarding the state of Bancroft's finances. Reading between the lines of the report, what I found most interesting was how different Bancroft is from the rest of the crowd under the microscope. Unlike the others, Bancroft ? the northernmost community of the bunch ? has a healthy buffer of forests, wetlands and lakes. When we compare our quality of life to that of most Ontarians, the wealth we experience here in Bancroft is far greater than that found in any bank account or pile of skyscrapers.

Situated in the heart of cottage country, Bancroft's potential in terms of tourism is virtually limitless. Walking around town over the weekend while covering the Wheels, Water and Wings event, hiking up to the Eagles Nest and along the Heritage Trail, it dawned on me how formidable this potential truly is. Although the report did shed light on Bancroft's financial assets, it neglected to assign any value to the two main resources that attract tourists from across Canada and around the world ? the jaw-dropping natural beauty and the people who choose Ontario's most talented town as their home. Understanding enough about the nature of the so-called ?free market,? I was not surprised to see the community's natural, social and cultural capital absent from the report. Unfortunately, leaving them out of this economic equation sells Bancroft short in terms of its true worth.

With some of the numbers in the auditor's report painting a not-so-pretty picture of the town's finances, it may be difficult for some folks to see Bancroft as the world class tourist destination it is. Hoping to build up the bottom-line, some might even look for a quick fix by encouraging any and all kinds of economic development. There are forces at work in this and every community in Ontario champing at the bit to press down their cookie cutters on this impressive landscape. The truth of the matter is that there is no get rich quick scheme. Nurturing the evolution of a community like ours takes time and there is still a lot of work to be done. The only way for us to ensure a healthy and enjoyable quality of life for every citizen, is through sharing, co-operating and caring for one another.