

The quality of water



By Nate Smelle

WHILE WATCHING THE politically engaged audience of 150 plus shuffle into the gymnasium of the Hastings Highlands Centre in Maynooth for the public meeting on the proposed vegetative buffer bylaw on the morning of Saturday, May 23 I began speculating on what might be learned at this communal gathering. By the number of attendees and the energy in the room before even the meeting had started, it was evident that the people of Hastings Highlands cared deeply about the outcome of Council's decision on this new bylaw.

With so many eager to hear the latest on this legislation and expecting to walk away from the public question-and-answer period with a better understanding of how this bylaw would either help or harm the municipality. Instead, a number of individuals decided to waste the public's time by using the form to promote their own political agendas.

Don't get me wrong, I'm usually a fan of such creative political engagements, however, I quickly acquired a distaste for these disruptions when I noticed people heading for the doors early as some of the individuals supposed to be asking questions about the vegetative buffer bylaw read prepared speeches on everything from garbage collection to the long gun registry. It is fair to say that if 150 or more people get up early on a sunny spring Saturday morning to take part in a public discussion on a certain subject they probably want to discuss that subject and not something else.

Also distracting from the democratic process on this day was a broken record of repeated questions. Questions such as: did the municipality afford this bylaw, who is going to enforce it and what will it mean for current waterfront property owners and existing structures, were repeated so many times I lost count. In spite of these distractions the meeting was still an enlightening encounter. Recognizing how passionately concerned people were on either side of the fence with respect to the proposed vegetative buffer bylaw I started to wonder why this bylaw had drummed up such controversy. Doesn't everybody living in cottage country want to improve water quality and the health of the Lake ecosystems that feed the local tourism industry?

It was this question that led me to look at this debate currently underway in Maynooth from a different angle. Almost everyone who walked up to the mic to add their voices to the public dialogue on this matter proclaimed their desire for the lakes in Hastings Highlands to be healthy and protected from reckless development. However, according to a showing of hands during the meeting, the room revealed that more than half in attendance did not believe this vegetative buffer bylaw was the way to achieve this goal. Wanting to protect our lakes, but not wanting to approve legislation aiming to help do so just didn't add up fully. That was until I started reading between the lines on what this debate was really about. Yes, the session may have been focused on the new bylaw, but it became clear as the meeting went on that the opposition to it was not because the people of Hastings Highlands didn't want their lakes protected. Surprisingly it instead seems to be rooted in resentment towards government involvement in aspects of our lives that we still consider private or even sacred. No one really wants anyone telling them what they can and cannot do on the land they call home... Do they?

Of course not, but this does not mean that we ought to abandon any sort of regulations or guidelines that are, or could be put in place to prevent those who don't respect their neighbour's right to enjoy their cottage or home on the water. Imagine if your view of the sunrise across the lake was taken away by a carelessly placed boathouse, or tainted by the scar of a clear-cut as the view from Hillary Phillips's Sunrise Lodge on Baptiste Lake was last year.

This debate forces us to ask questions. Good questions worth listening to and discussing. Rather than questioning whether Hastings Highlands can afford this bylaw, the municipality should be looking at whether it can afford not to take action to protect the lakes that define its identity. With the Navigable Waters act no longer helping to protect our abundance of freshwater in Ontario and across the country, it is now more important than ever to keep a close eye on the health condition of our water. Maybe this bylaw is not perfect, but it is in my opinion a step in the right direction.