

Transit operator invites Doug Ford to Bancroft



By Chris Houston

Bancroft Community Transit's Gwen Coish has invited Ontario Premier Doug Ford to visit Bancroft. In an interview with The Bancroft Times on July 18, Coish said "I'm inviting Mr. Ford to come and see who we are and what we do and why we're fighting for this community, and why we're raising money."

Bancroft Community Transit recently launched the Drive for Change fundraising campaign, aiming to raise \$115,000 to help fund the four new vehicles that the organization needs to keep their essential transit services functioning.

Bancroft Community Transit is a registered charity that was founded in 2001 and Coish is the organization's director of operations. The organization is the only public transit provider for North Hastings. Coish and her team also provide specialized transportation services for people on the Ontario Works and Ontario Disability Support Programs, helping them with transportation for employment, medical appointments and other needs. The team delivers groceries to seniors and runs day trips for the residents of Hastings Centennial Manor long-term care home.

Bancroft Community Transit also runs the Wattle & Daub Cafe and Bancroft's Charcuterie Studio. These two social enterprises combined generate \$55,000 of revenue to subsidize the transit.

Speaking to The Bancroft Times, Coish described the work of Kailey, the staff member who delivers groceries: "she's out there every week and she knows all of our clients." Coish explained that for many older and isolated seniors, the food delivery is one of the few interactions they look forward to. Kailey ensures that people get what they need. Coish said "she drives all over the place and delivers groceries and talks to them on the phone" she knows exactly the brand of cereal that they eat, everything about them and they love her."

Rural transit is a lot more personal than in the big cities. Serving mostly an older population, Kailey keeps a watchful eye over her clients. Coish said that: "She knows that if they're not there, or if they're not answering, or if there's something not quite right, she'll come back and she'll say, we have to check up on this person."

Coish explained that her team provides this level of personal care not because it is the normal role of public transit providers, but "because we see that there's a gap in the community?I can't imagine not doing that," she said. Yet, unless things change soon, some

services may come to an end.

Bancroft Community Transit has a funding gap. The organization receives just under \$89,000 per year from the Government of Ontario to run public transit. Four municipal governments also provide financial support: Bancroft, Hastings Highlands, Faraday and Wollaston contribute a total of \$13,000.

The organization was recently denied funding requested from Hastings County. Coish told the Bancroft Times that she was disappointed, but "respects that there were tough choices and tough decisions to make." In addition to the \$89,000 for public transit, the provincial government also pays an allowance per kilometer for driving Ontario Works and ODSP clients.

Coish explained that her organization receives less government financial support per person than many urban transit providers, even though her team transports people over much longer distances. Despite the frugal approach and reliance on volunteers, the provincial government funding doesn't cover the cost. Coish said that the provincial funding "barely pays for one and a half drivers, doesn't pay for the maintenance, it doesn't pay for the gas."

The combined government support and social enterprise revenue falls massively short of the true cost of operating a transportation service that covers North Hastings. The organization's six aging vehicles have an average of 400,000 kilometres on the clock. The vehicles are in visibly bad shape and most are in need of replacement. Over the next four years, the organization needs \$660,000 to cover the costs of four new vehicles.

Coish is frustrated with the lack of funding for vehicles and how her team needs to apply for unpredictable ad hoc grant opportunities to cover core costs. She hopes that she doesn't need to cut essential services.

Coish wishes that rural public transit was properly funded. She said that the way of calculating how much transit providers are supported, focuses on traveller numbers, not distance travelled. That system favours the denser and more urban transit providers and fails to consider the complexity of providing transit in rural Canada. Coish explained that compared to transit operators like the Toronto Transit Commission, Bancroft Community Transit is considered as a "small" operator. Yet, the organization covers a significantly larger geographical area than most transit corporations.

In order to try to keep all services running, Coish has launched a fundraising campaign and applied for federal government support via the Rural Transit Solution Fund. The Drive for Change campaign features fundraising containers called Buddy Buckets. There are Buddy Buckets at the Wattle & Daub Cafe, in Bancroft's No Frills, and in PhysioNorth. Since recently launching the campaign, people have donated \$26,000.

Coish is optimistic that if Premier Ford paid her a visit and heard how challenging the current framework was, he would improve the system. She said "I'm inviting Mr. Ford to come and see who we are and what we do, and and, and why we're fighting for this community, and why we're raising money. To see the people that we serve." Until then, she is hoping for federal support and fundraising to get needed vehicles.

Coish told The Bancroft Times that people can donate by sending e-transfers to bancroft@bellnet.ca or telephoning BCT via 613-332-8291, Gwen Coish is on extension #104. As a registered charity, the organization can provide tax receipts for any donations.