

TROUT tries to keep on trucking

By Tony Pearson

It isn't easy trying to operate a public transit service in a rural area. Community Care North Hastings has been working on it since the 1990s, and it hasn't become less difficult with the passage of time. Now recent decisions by Hastings Highlands are about to create more financial complications.

Hastings Highlands recently informed the Town of Bancroft, which is the lead for the multi-municipal TROUT public transit system, that it was no longer prepared to extend financial support to the system's operation.

According to Mayor Vivian Bloom, who notes that the decision must be ratified at its March 16 meeting, the reason was financial ? meeting residents' transport services for less money. The council feels that the needs of the regular TROUT riders from that township can be met at lower cost through Bancroft Community Transit. For the township, the comparison is \$3,000 compared to \$8,000.

Mayor Bloom also stated that even if there is a user fee, it will cost the riders less than the TROUT charges. (For a single trip from Maynooth to Bancroft and back, the TROUT charges \$15. If the rider buys a book of 10 tickets, the return trip cost goes down to \$11. If a person books a ride with a volunteer driver, they will pay about \$30 in mileage charges)

However, the impact will be greater than the withdrawal of the Hastings Highlands \$8,000 contribution to the TROUT, which in all costs about \$160,000 to \$170,000 a year to operate. The removal of the Hastings Highlands overall population and TROUT ridership will mean reductions in its budget under the formula used to calculate the provincial government contribution through the Gas Tax rebate.

Gordon MacDonald, CEO of Community Care North Hastings, which manages the system (the buses are owned and operated by R & L) reports that the TROUT, which used to operate six days a week, will be down to three: In-town Bancroft service on Tuesdays, Fridays and Sundays, plus Cardiff service on Fridays and Sundays. The monthly service to Coe Hill will also continue.

Community Care North Hastings will continue to offer a volunteer transportation service for seniors 55 and older. This service is provided by volunteer drivers, at standard rates for mileage. ?We are committed to providing transportation in North Hastings and Highlands East,? MacDonald stated. ?Our vision continues to be a Regional Public Transit service in this area. We continue to believe that the public wants and needs transportation services. However, there must be a political will to provide for those who cannot use a car.? He added that population figures show a significant number of seniors without cars all over the region. ?This shows need. But for people to take advantage, the service needs express political support, encouragement and promotion.?

?Public transit is more than individual independence.? MacDonald added. ?It is also an economic driver, an environmental strategy, and most important, a means to ensure community accessibility for all. We have been providing bus services since 1994, and we will continue.?

For Hastings Highlands, Mayor Bloom stated: ?This is not a decision which we approach lightly. We do support supplying good affordable transit for our residents and we will continue to serve our needful residents.?