

Wollaston council gets a lot of food for thought

By Jim Eadie

Wollaston Township council had a busy month, meeting on a revised schedule to accommodate meeting with the local MPP Todd Smith. The regular meeting was held on Dec. 8, followed less than a week later meeting Smith in an afternoon session on Dec 14. Gord McDonald, executive director of Community Care North Hastings, spoke to council about the TROUT bus service, and state of public transit in North Hastings. A past recommendation by McDonald to establish a transit board, and a municipal tax levy to support such a system did not go over well with municipalities then, and this time he was only asking for a conversation.

"I am not asking for money," he said. "I only ask for a continuing discussion. Does a public transit system have value for you? Public transit will never pay for itself, there isn't a public transit system in the world that is self supporting."

McDonald reminded council that gas tax money would be leveraged from the province based on the contributions of the municipalities to a public transit system.

"The last time I was here, the reeve at the time told me: we don't need you here, or want you here," said McDonald. "That put us in a complex legal situation providing service when we were told we were not wanted. So we called the riders ourselves, and arranged a charter with R&L bus lines once a month. That is not a TROUT bus that comes here now? it is not public transit."

"We know that if there is an increase in service, ridership increases," said Reeve Graham Blair. "This is not just all about Wollaston Township? it is broader than that. It needs everyone's contributions to make it work."

"We are not the only municipality that struggles with this," said clerk Jennifer Cohen.

"There are a number of questions to ask," said McDonald. "At this point it is down to this question: Is there any value in having a public transit system in Wollaston Township?"

"There is a lot of food for thought there," said Blair.

Council will begin budget deliberations in the New Year, where that question will undoubtedly be considered.

Replacement of the culvert at the bottom of the hill at "devil's elbow" on the Old Hastings Rd. was awarded to Tim Conlin Blasting and Construction with the low bid of \$27,300. Conlin, who was present at the council meeting, engaged in further conversation with council about cost savings he proposes for the municipality. Conlin offered to subtract nearly \$6,000 from his bid, in exchange for township roads department support with some material, equipment and labour. Council agreed, after consulting with the roads supervisor Kirk McCaw who was also present at the meeting. A detailed agreement will be prepared to guide this arrangement.

In a related matter, Cohen told council that McCaw had contacted Jewell Engineering regarding the design work they had done on the realignment project at the same location. Concern had been expressed about the suitability of the work that was done, and the cost. "They have promised to review the billing for this project," said Cohen. "They have also agreed to review the road design, and provide us with modified drawings that will include a more reasonable grade. I have not yet received this revised documentation."

Council presented their list of concerns to MPP Todd Smith during the Dec 14 meeting. The list of municipal worries is lengthy, but includes the following issues:

- appropriate funding for small, rural communities under 10,000 population;
- funding for municipal buildings (library, fire hall);
- review of Conservation Authorities funding model;
- importance of development on private roads currently hampered;
- taxation lost to Managed Forest program participants;
- disappointment in the EORN plan to bring broadband to rural areas;
- needed updates to Police Services Act to consider service provision appropriate to small rural communities;
- recent cuts in funding for family health teams;
- cost of hydro electricity;
- loss of Coe Hill Warriors Day due in part to inaccessible provincial funding.

Smith listened carefully, and will keep in touch with the municipality.