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Municipal Co-Operation Aims to Improve Safety and Well-being in North Hastings

In a unique show of collaboration, seven north Hastings County municipalities have embarked on a project that aims to improve quality of life in the region. Successive provincial governments have given Ontario municipalities a deadline of January, 2021, to create a community safety and well-being plan. In North Hastings, rather than going it alone, councils from Bancroft, Hastings Highlands, Wollaston, Limerick, Faraday, Carlow/Mayo, and Tudor and Cashel adopted a collaborative approach that is fairly unique among over 400 Ontario municipalities.

Representatives of 30 organizations which serve all of North Hastings provided their perspectives on health and safety issues faced by people throughout the region. This information will help the project identify ways that the whole community can work together to improve safety and well-being for everyone. A final plan, to be submitted to the province's Solicitor General, will detail changes in public policy, social programs and resources, and community awareness, interests and activities that can improve public safety, health and well-being, while reducing crime, disorder and social isolation in the area. In the face of rising costs of emergency response, heavy social agency caseloads, and escalating calls for remedial assistance in housing, mental health and child safety, municipal leaders hope that a new approach will make good social and economic sense.

The plan will emphasize the health and safety of residents, improved community ties and the reduction of policing and other emergency services costs. Potential benefits include more effective use of current resources and improved connections among the people and social agencies of north Hastings County. The province has made no commitments to increase funding to support those goals; so this local initiative is focused on doing things better with the resources at hand. "Whether it is law enforcement, crisis prevention, social services or youth programs – services in north Hastings are delivered across municipal boundaries. The solutions must reflect that. It makes sense to draw up a collaborative plan that reflects that reality," says Pat Pilgrim, CAO of Hastings Highlands and co-chair of this north Hastings planning initiative.

Changing the Model

"It is no coincidence that this initiative is directed by the government ministry in charge of policing (Ministry of the Solicitor General), says Dr. Hugh Russell, technical advisor to the north Hastings project, whose career as a social psychologist has been spent working with municipal governance, social agencies and law enforcement. "Municipalities are dealing with increased costs because we often ask emergency services people (like police, fire, emergency medical technicians, child security and mental health) to deal with problems that might have been prevented earlier with more effective interventions," says Russell. OPP Staff Sergeant Jeff Mackinnon agrees and gives this example: "In north Hastings, 65 per cent of calls received by OPP involve domestic and mental health issues. Sending two officers to spend the day at the Belleville hospital accompanying an individual in crisis is not the most effective way to handle the situation. When we are called, it is the last resort, we are called in to clean things up.

It would be smarter to address the problem before it balloons into an emergency. Policing experts are behind this because the research shows it works.”

Working Together

Municipal governments are on the front lines when it comes to community safety and well-being. “This process also recognizes that individual municipalities might be facing specific issues,” says Lianne Sauter, Director of Corporate Services/Clerk for Bancroft and co-chair of the initiative. “Collaboration breaks down silos that often plague rural municipalities. It can also help identify solutions to emerging issues.” Sauter has extensive experience in municipal policy and community safety and well-being planning. She led the creation of Bancroft’s 2016 plan; one of the first completed in the province. But instead of continuing unilaterally, Bancroft readily agreed to reboot its process to include surrounding municipalities. It is an innovative solution to the challenges that face north Hastings.

Work on the initiative will continue throughout the year. The next phase will include a broad public consultation in order to learn about challenges north Hastings people face; and what they would like to see put in place to help address those challenges.

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