

Boycott looks back on 20 years in municipal politics

Former Colborne Reeve cites downtown Streetscape as a success, and failure to achieve one-tier county government as a major disappointment

Editor's note: While several area reeves and mayors are leaving public office this week, most of them stayed in the public eye during the fall as they ran for re-election. However, former Colborne Mayor George Boycott, who chose not to stand for election, stepped out of the spotlight entirely, and we now take a look back at his political career.

by TOM PHILP
The Independent

Webster's dictionary defines 'boycott' as "shutting out all social and commercial interaction." Apparently, Webster never met George Boycott, Colborne's outgoing reeve, the epitome of ... well ... anything but a boycott.

In 1978 George and his wife, Susie, sold their business in Australia, and set off for a Canadian adventure with three young daughters, Kym, Nikki and Jenette. They spent three months touring southern Ontario, looking for "the right place" to raise their kids, start a business, and get to know a new community and country.

George became a realtor. Susie opened a restaurant in Cobourg. The kids went to local schools, and did the things kids do in small towns.

met people who are still close friends twenty years later. In 1980 I decided to jump in with both feet and run for village council. I knocked on every door in the village. I got to know a lot of people very quickly once I took that first step.

Q. What was the biggest hurdle you had to overcome in politics?

A. Not being known. I was not only from another community, I was from another country. You're never really considered to be "from" a place unless you can trace your family roots locally. It's not your home, per se. The kids were seven, five and three years of age when we arrived in Colborne, so it's definitely more "home" to them than Australia. But I had to set out to show people that this was our new home, and I could represent our community.

Industrial Park. That doesn't guarantee new industry will locate there, but it does guarantee everybody in Colborne will have to pay for it. For about \$1 million we could upgrade a sewage system within the park itself, and lessen the tax burden. As far as water is concerned, council is taking steps to repair minor deficiencies in Colborne's system, but we have never had a concern with the quality of our water supply.

Q. What were the biggest challenges faced by councils on which you served?

A. I can think of several. Amalgamation with Cramahe is less than the single-tier governance Colborne Council wanted, but I'm satisfied it will fulfill the short-term needs of the community, while allowing Colborne to retain its own identity. Selling the electrical component of the PUC was a difficult decision, but the options were limited, and I think the decision has been fully justified. The new arena posed tough questions financially, but the community, particularly the youth of the community, will reap the benefits. There was only one choice to be made: a new arena, or no arena.

Together George and Susie planned, created and opened "The Big Apple" in 1987, working with local partners to develop one of Ontario's most recognized tourist attractions. They sold their shares in the successful agri-tourist business in 1992, bought the first franchise of real estate company Bowes & Cocks Limited, and are celebrating their eighth year of success with Team Realty.

Colborne has been George and Susie's home for 21 years. For more than 14 of those years George has been a fixture in local politics. In a recent interview George talked about the social, commercial and political things he has "Boycotted" for two decades.

Q. What brought you to politics in the first place?

A. When we arrived here we didn't know anybody, and I wanted to get involved in my new Canadian home. I joined a service club, and

Q. What is the accomplishment you are most proud of as a politician?

A. I think the downtown revitalization, the Streetscape is a major goal realized. The downtown core needed a facelift. Not everybody likes it; not everybody likes changing things from "the way it's always been." But I knew it had to be done to attract new business, to motivate business people to invest in the village. It's very gratifying to see how fast the empty stores filled up after the project was finished. We're excited about that.

Q. What has been your biggest disappointment as a politician?

A. Not going to a single-tier system of government in Northumberland. It just makes sense today. It is clearly the most cost-effective way to provide services to all of our municipalities. The province is heading in that direction anyway, and we should have jumped on it when we had a chance to do so.

Q. Most of the Colborne/Cramahe candidates for the upcoming municipal election have endorsed upgrading and expansion of the water and sewage systems. Do you support that initiative?

A. Not the way it's being proposed. Say we spend the estimated \$6 million to extend village sewers to the

Q. What is the biggest challenge facing the amalgamated municipality of Cramahe?

A. Continuing to provide services at current levels, while keeping costs and taxes down. It always boils down to money. Can we afford this? Should we eliminate that? It's fine to talk about improving infrastructure as a basis for attracting people to the area, but there are costs involved, and somebody has to pay for it. Downloading hasn't stopped, and new councils will have to make difficult decisions to balance the books.

Q. What is your greatest personal achievement since coming to Colborne in 1978?

A. The Big Apple. The idea came to me after seeing a guy in Australia build a tourist destination around a big pineapple. I thought, "Who would visit a Big Pineapple?" and the answer was, "Lots of people." The idea stuck. It's become the biggest employment training opportunity for hundreds of local kids, and employs many local families. Before the Big Apple nobody spoke of "The Apple Route." That was a result of the Big Apple. I'm very proud of that.

Boyd featured on TVO 'Life & Times'
Famous Canadian bank robber Edwin Alonzo Boyd, who counted the bank in Colborne as one of his hold-ups, is profiled in a TVO "Life and Times" special. Boyd was also a hero of ill-fated escape artist Tyrone Conn, who held up the Colborne bank in 1999, just after his history-making breakout from Kingston Penitentiary, and just before his death. The TVO special on Boyd airs on Thursday, Jan 6, at 10 pm.

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