

Letter to the Editor

Council's rationale for cancelling Keeler catering dept.

Editor's note: Mayor Marc Coombs was unable to attend the May 27 meeting of Cramahe Council when council members were asked to give council's rationale for closing the township-operated catering function in the Rotary Room at the Keeler Centre. He was requested to provide a response to two questions:

1. Given that this council was elected with the expectation it would consult widely before taking action on significant decisions affecting the community, why was there no public consultation or consultation with "experts" before a decision was made to end the catering function run by the township?

2. Virtually all of the people who have written to the paper regarding the changes at the Rotary Room have been critical of the decision. As such, the public has had its opportunity to voice its opinions and give its suggestions. Council conducted its discussion of the closing of township catering behind closed doors and as such has not had the chance to give its side. Would either of you (Mayor Marc Coombs or Councillor Tim Gilligan) like to give your thoughts on the "other (council) side" of the argument to end catering?

The mayor's response is printed below.

To the Editor:

During my political career, I have avoided writing letters to the editor but now, due to the persistent disinformation and rumour that is circulating in the community over council's recent decision to close the municipally run catering business aspect of the Rotary Hall, I am writing this on behalf of, and with the full support of, all council members to explain the rationale and background to council's decision, and also the future plan going forward, so everyone may be accurately informed.

To place things in perspective, shortly after the Keeler Centre was opened, a decision was made to enter into the catering business full-time. At that time, there was a hue and cry over the decision. I recall comments that the municipality shouldn't be competing against private business, especially local business taxpayers.

As well, it was thought we would never be able to make any money at it and there also was concern we would be competing against the church halls and especially that we would be putting undue pressure on the Legion and their catering and room rental business.

In the fullness of time, all of these concerns have proven to be correct. Over

the years, various councils have wrestled with the financial burden of trying to run a successful catering operation. While the Rotary Room has seen a large number of people through the doors, there have never been enough profitable events to offset the community-type events, which are so important to the building.

Certainly, this present council heard loudly and clearly during the election season that we were expected to rein in expenditures and be fiscally responsible, particularly in relation to the Keeler Centre and the Rotary Hall operations. At the start of 2007, council made it abundantly clear that we were serious about controlling our losses at the Rotary Room.

On no occasion did we ever say we had to make a profit. I believe council was more concerned about controlling our costs and staying within budgets.

During the 2008 budget deliberations, council once again tackled the Rotary Hall issue and, in particular, the catering operations. It was discussed during at least three meetings and council asked for a business plan for the catering operation so we could be more comfortable with supporting the ongoing catering operation.

Unfortunately, once we saw the figures with the huge losses incurred by the catering operation and the more we discussed this issue the more apparent it became that this was a business that the taxpayers just shouldn't be subsidizing.

As some of these discussions included discussions around personnel, we had to conduct those parts in-camera in order to comply with the law regarding protection of an employee's right to privacy.

We spoke with other municipalities and catering operations and the clear message was that catering should be handled by the private sector. As I said above, it became clear there just wasn't, and wouldn't be, enough business to sustain a full-time catering operation.

Council discussed various options to try and save this but came to the inevitable conclusion that many municipalities before us have come to: that catering belongs in the private sector.

The decision was a tough one for council as we all knew this would affect our loyal staff at the Rotary Hall. However, in good conscience, we could not continue down the path we were on. In a nutshell, our community is too small and there are not enough large events to justify having a full-time catering business.

Despite what some may feel, council was, and is, fully aware of the community facet of the Keeler Centre and its value to the community at large.

We are fully in support of the vision for the Keeler Centre as represented in the Parks & Recreation Master Plan, that is "every effort be made to ensure the full use of the Keeler Centre and to encourage its use by local sports and service groups so that the community takes full advantage of all the facilities offered by this building."

We discussed at length how we would be able to accommodate the various user groups that use the hall. (Rotary, Optimists and Probus account for about two-thirds of the events held at the Rotary Hall.) Various options were laid out and discussed. We very definitely wanted these groups to continue to use the hall and to encourage them to do so.

On no occasion did we ever even think of charging these groups for use of the hall, nor did we ever (as has been rumoured) consider asking them to come before council "hat in hand" every month to ask for relief from the hall fees. Stories to the contrary that are circulating are simply not true and one would wonder about their purpose.

Any community groups currently not paying rent can continue on as they have been before and staff will work with them to make the transition at least as seamless as possible. As soon as our decision had been made, which incidentally was

supported by all council members, staff contacted the user groups and informed them of the changes.

After June 30, renters of the hall will be able to choose their own caterer and run their own bar. The facilities, including chairs, tables, tablecloths, etc. will be available to them. The only stipulations are that they must meet current health regulations and hire our bartender to oversee the bar operations to ensure public safety and adherence to the law.

It is hoped this will once again provide non-profit community groups with a wonderful opportunity to fundraise which puts more dollars directly back into our community.

The canteen operation is staying as is with no changes.

There seems to be an impression the Rotary Hall is "closing" or that council isn't interested in continuing its use. Nothing could be further from the truth. Council is, in fact, very committed to the increased use of the hall. My personal feeling is that while continuing to support the existing uses, the hall could be utilized much more as a true "community centre" in keeping with the Master Plan "vision" by adding seniors programming and getting more people into the building and participating in activities, whether that be yoga, tai-chi, art lessons or whatever.

Community Services Director Terry Scott has started to get the ball rolling already and is in the process of getting community input as to what programs would be of interest.

As well, since our decision, I have been approached by various people who have suggested the catering be tendered out, which is an interesting possibility. Others have suggested they would like to see a committee formed to provide input into programming at the Rotary Hall, the Vourneen Buff Jack Center and perhaps the Castleton Town Hall. Again, these ideas all have merit and we will be looking for public input on how to best proceed.

In conclusion, no one on council enjoyed making the decision we made, but we are elected to make decisions. Not all of them are easy and not all of them are popular but, at the end of the day, each member of council does what they truly feel is in the best interest of the taxpayer of this community.

We all look forward to working with the community on the next steps.

Marc Coombs
Mayor- Cramahe Township
On behalf of Cramahe Council

We spoke with other municipalities and catering operations and the clear message was that catering should be handled by the private sector.

— Mark Coombs,
mayor