

It's wait and see for Keeler Centre review committee

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After almost two hours of discussion, the Keeler Centre Rotary Hall Planning Advisory Committee has decided it needs more information from Cramahe Township council.

July 22, the group looked at opportunities and challenges for the facility, then decided it would be wasting its time if its ideas don't match council's vision.

In the opinion of some of the committee members, inconsistency has marked council decisions regarding the facility. Parks and Recreation Committee member Felicity Sidnell-Reid put forward the notion that the group wants to know how council sees the building, where the money will come from to fund activities and how it will be budgeted. The members need to know the costs and which of those will be applied to programs and services offered in the building, she said.

Parks and Recreation Committee Chair Rita Collins appeared to agree, stating, "We need council's direction. We could present them a report and they could say it was too expensive."

Another committee member suggested the group needs an interpretation from council of the words "effective" and "efficient".

After listening to the group and taking notes, Community Services Director Terry Scott acknowledged they had many questions and few answers. He wished he could say the situation was black and white and offer them magic answers. He advised them Mayor Marc Coombs would be at the next planning committee meeting and would be informed in advance of the committee concerns and questions.

The mandate

Mr. Scott welcomed the 14 members to the 7 p.m. meeting in Rotary Hall and explained the committee mandate.

Cramahe council has directed administration to form a committee to form a new programming plan for the Keeler

Centre and Rotary Hall. Mr. Scott expressed his hope that the group could begin to develop an action plan so some things could be acted upon by September 2008, with others happening later. He plans to report to council on Nov. 18.

It was his understanding the committee would look at programming and use, and when asked whether catering was to be included in the considerations, he replied council has been clear: "It wants to look ahead, not back."

Shirley Ross represented the Colborne and District Horticultural Society and asked how the committee's discussions fit with the proposal made by the Castleton Colborne Optimists to council July 15.

In that proposal, the Optimist-led committee suggested council reinstate the catering staff but on a contractual basis until the end of 2009. As well, the presenters on July 15 suggested there was a need for the township to better define its costs and revenues. Using the system now in place, it is unclear how much of the costs attributed to catering in the 2007 budget were actually catering costs.

Mr. Scott advised Mrs. Ross that the recommendations were made to council and council will respond.

When Colleen vandeValk wondered aloud if there had been further discussions of the matter, Mr. Scott stated there would be a response forthwith.

Getting back to the matter of program planning, Colborne Masons member Les Day asked who performed this function before now.

The Community Services Director explained Donna Rusaw had looked after catering and special events. Programming was done by groups in the community and facilitated by Ms. Rusaw. Mr. Scott and his predecessors have also helped.

The brainstorming session brought a multitude of suggestions and ideas.

Bob Compton of the Trillium Walkers proposed the Keeler Centre is more than an ice centre.

If the township wants to sell it as a place to hold weddings, bingos and meetings, it needs to spruce up its appearance, he said, noting the parking lot is half-paved, there are few trees and little landscaping, hence few places for

Members take a pause; await information from Cramahe council.

photo opportunities.

Rotarian Graham Norcutt proposed there would be less confusion if the building had its name on the wall.

Mrs. Collins suggested there be better directions from the downtown. Her proposal that there be more advertising was qualified by Mr. Scott. At one time, the Community Services Department advertised upcoming events in the Chronicle. Now, all advertising is controlled by the administrative staff at the town hall.

Saturday ice times, and late snow removal were mentioned as problems needing to be addressed.

Specific program suggestions

Then the suggestions became more specific.

Cards, board games, fitness classes, yoga and a wide range of youth activities were proposed as possibilities, with the understanding they don't conflict with similar activities in other locations in the township.

After school drop-ins, band sessions and sports activities on the ice pad in summer were offered as ways to get kids into the center who are not involved in organized sports.

One key to these activities is some kind of parent involvement.

Family movie nights got enthusiastic support, and summer concerts were mentioned, either at the Keeler Centre or on the pad of the former Colborne Cramahe Arena.

Pre-school activities and

programs shared with the YMCA were put forward. Even cooking classes were suggested.

Volunteer Diane Gibson thought cooking classes might be something that could be done at the VBJ Centre, soon to become a township building.

The challenges in offering these programs were quickly identified, and alluded to the final decision to seek council's vision.

Mrs. Gibson noted that a lot of volunteers would be needed.

Mr. Compton suggested Mr. Scott simply post a big \$ sign on his chart, as all ideas would cost money.

Mrs. Collins went one step further and proposed the township would have to hire people - at a cost.

Mrs. vandeValk drew the group back to comments made by council that heat, hydro and other bills must be attributed to the overhead of the building. If the programs are to be break-even, must they be included, she asked.

Legion member Patti May carried the concept on, wondering how you come close to break-even without pricing yourself out of the market.

As if on cue, Mr. Norcutt stated what has been acknowledged by most communities - buildings like the Keeler Centre will never be profit centres. "Council must admit that before we go any farther," he said.

The Community Services Director agreed community centres cost money. He offered a ball park figure of about \$50,000 a year.

Ms. May did the quick math to put forward the idea that the township needs to bring in about \$4,500 a month more to break even. Using this kind of approach would at least allow the township to see if it is on track, she suggested.

Management styles would appear to have been a factor in some of Mr. Scott's deliberations with the township administration and council. He admitted that, in the past, he had taken an overall view of his departmental budget. Last year, he was 99 per cent on budget. Council looked at the one

per cent situation - township-operated catering - and declared costs were too high, he said.

When it comes to bringing in new visitors, several members agreed there hasn't been enough marketing done outside the community by the township.

After listening to suggestions that competition, transportation and lack of local accommodation were problems, the Community Services Director praised the former Catering and Special Events Coordinator for her efforts to bring weddings. He admitted it is difficult to bring in a lot of business through weddings alone. The population is aging, and it's tough to market a room when there is no local accommodation.

The loss of township-operated catering is now another factor that makes booking events more challenging, it was suggested.

The one major income generator - the Keeler Centre's geothermal heating - has been underutilized.

Confusion over the bar operation still reigns.

Mr. Scott tried to explain that the township is now operating the bar except for special events. But that wasn't what at least two members at the meeting thought council had decided in June.

At the June 17, Cramahe Township council meeting, it appeared the township had already made a deal in private meetings with Colborne Rotary to hand the liquor licence over to the service group.

When others in the room objected to the solution, council backtracked but did not publicly state its long-term intentions.

As for traditional events on the Rotary Hall calendar, there is little to report.

Rotary has been asked to run the Christmas Dinner for businesses in the community but has not replied. A call has been put out to service groups in the community to see if anyone wants to take on the New Year's Eve party.

Questions about groups who wish to bring in food and drinks are in the process of being resolved.