

REES' Pieces

Can we afford the costs?

It seems like one step forward and three steps back, when it comes to Colchester and Truro moving ahead. However, that won't last forever. Hopefully, things will resume moving forward at a steady pace.

There are two recent activities which are positive and over time, bring positive results to Colchester as a whole.

The items are final approval for a Regional Economic Network (REN), which involves Colchester four municipalities: Truro, Stewiacke, Millbrook and the municipality. The other positive move forward is council's agreement to become pro-active on development of the Debert Airport.

Of course one item, like a lump of coal for Christmas, is the engineers report advising Colchester and Truro council's must spend \$532,000 to dehumidify the RECC centre to preserve the building and create an enjoyable experience for spectators.

Those are the major items concerning Colchester, but there's a lot happening on the provincial scene, which is troubling and could be an expensive fix for taxpayers. Of course at the top of the list is the "work to rule" and government's attempts to resolve issues to put the education system back on track. Opinions are varied and those who have poked up their head in support of government actions have been subjected to a lot of social media ridicule. Let's hope it's solved soon.

Some people have suggested they don't have a problem with salary levels for the various teacher classifications, but many teachers are over qualified for the positions they are now employed. For example a science teacher with the highest qualifications should not be teaching grade primary.

One suggestion, which seemed a practical approach to keep costs in line, yet still pay teachers the going rate, would require each school to post level of qualifications, subjects and grade for teaching staff. The suggestion was teachers with better qualifications could apply for the positions, but would only be paid at the rate for the posted position.

Many business people are of the opinion, it is ridiculous to have an abundance of overqualified teachers in certain positions. In their business they identify how many and what level of qualifications they require and use those tools to develop the required levels of expertise.

I realize passing along the suggestions of others on this subject will send ripples or tidal waves through the teaching profession, but the education system must get back on track and students having the full scope of school activities at their disposal.

Running almost parallel is the overwhelming vote to strike taken by NSGEU members. The McNeil government will have a rocky road in the early part of 2017. McNeil has been consistent claiming he will not sign off on an agreement, which Nova Scotians cannot afford.

Yes, professionals in the public service, education, or healthcare must be paid according to similar positions in other provinces, but they must also recognize there is only one taxpayer, and most of the taxpayers are not in that earning category.

Over and above salary costs is the underlying costs of years of service and pensions, which does not exist in private business. One colleague told me about his brother retiring to a good pension, and upon retirement also received a "Years of Service" payment of \$38,000.00. Costs of pension contributions, pension plan top ups, etc is a situation of major concern to management and elected officials.

Word being leaked out about UNSM member municipalities is the cost of pensions is a major concern and more downloading is being done from other levels of government. As of press-time, I was not able to get the exact figures for each category of annual contributions for employee payroll and pension costs. However, I was told it was going to cost one municipality in excess of \$10,000 annually for each employee. That would amount of approximately \$1.4-Billion each year.

The other disappointing reality is Colchester and Truro Councils are going to have to deal with a humidity issue at the RECC, which engineers say will cost \$532,000 to fix. Operating and energy costs have far exceeded, what professionals stated would happen. The humidity topic alone should make for interesting January council meetings.

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year to everyone.

Maurice

Taggart: Disappointed, Frustrated and Angry

By Tom Taggart

Three days ago I wrote my article for the Shoreline Journal and stated things were fairly quiet around council as the holiday season approaches. My, how things can change in a few days!!!!

To say I am disappointed, frustrated and angry about the recent information surrounding the RECC would be an understatement! I feel I have a responsibility to explain how things have evolved to put myself, our council and you the tax payers of Colchester County in this very disappointing position.

Sometime around 2006 Truro and Colchester made a bid to host the Canada winter games. It is my understanding the reason this bid failed was because we did not have adequate facilities to host. In an effort to provide modern recreational facilities and enable our community to hold larger events, a group of well intentioned community and Municipal leaders began a campaign to build this facility.

When I was first elected to council in the fall of 2008 this process was in full swing. I clearly remember a parade of PROFESSIONALS, ENGINEERS, ARCHITECTS, DESIGNERS and CONSULTANTS all going before council with advice on what to build and how great this would be for our communities.

These PROFESSIONALS all spoke about their great experience and vast knowledge in building these facilities. Given that no person on Council or staff had any experience or expertise in constructing such a

facility, a competitive bidding process was engaged and these PROFESSIONALS were hired and as PROFESSIONALS were very well paid to the tune of 14% of the value of the project.

As a result, we undertook a project which we were advised would cost \$34 million and would be extremely energy efficient and produce an annual operating deficit \$360,000 divided evenly between the Town and the County. The Federal and Provincial Governments would each provide \$10 million; the community would raise \$5 million and the Municipalities would provide the remainder as well as any operating deficits.

Well 8 years later we have a facility which is a true asset to our community, provides a high quality recreational facility and has attracted world class events. However, it has clearly, struggled! I recall the Construction Management Company sitting before council and proudly proclaiming they would be "on time and UNDER budget"

Well, it was well OVER budget, the energy consumption and costs are double what we were told, and the operating deficit is more than double what we were advised.

Guess what! THE PROFESSIONALS are gone and we, you the tax payers are left holding the bag!

So who is responsible? Today I cannot answer that question. However I readily accept my role in it as I voted in support of this facility in 2008. Would I vote different today? Honestly cannot answer that question! Where would we be if we were

still trying to hold events and encourage people to live in and grow our communities without it? There are many different opinions on that.

Back to my role in this. I made my decision on what I considered to be sound PROFESSIONAL advice. I now believe I was sold a bill of goods. As Councillors, we have been advised not to comment on anything that may affect any future or ongoing legal proceedings.

What I do believe, is that I or we as a council have an obligation to you the taxpayers to have an independent review of all the facts and presentations leading up to the decision to build as well as to where we are today. I will be asking for that review at our next council meeting.

Now where are we today? On Thursday we were advised the dehumidification units at the RECC were woefully undersized. This has resulted in corrosion, mould and humidity issues affecting the electronics in the building.

A national engineering company has advised the dehumidification units need to be ten times greater than those that are currently installed. This is estimated to cost \$532,000.

When I asked this engineer how it could be possible the current units could be so undersized, he replied he could only say it was "simple physics". When I asked did he warranty his work the answer was that was not typically how these things work!!

At this point council has only approved going to tender.

RECC Centre Humidity

Continued from page 1

draft designs to provide energy saving solutions.

Colchester and Truro officials are very disappointed with the recent revelations. "While it is very frustrating to face another considerable investment in the RECC, not doing this upgrade would cost us much more in the long run in terms of humidity damage and lost event revenues" said Colchester Mayor Christine Blair.

Colchester pays 60% of the operating costs for the facility and it's upsetting to municipal staff and council because operating costs have been far beyond the anticipated annual cost of \$142,000.00. Last summer, this reporter, was told by a person, not connected with council, but an experienced ice-maker, who shared his knowledge saying the ice-making plant at the RECC was undersized and the chillers/compressors would soon be damaged, beyond repair, from constantly overworking. That person, who wished to remain unnamed, said, in his opinion, the com-

pressors or chillers would have to be replaced within five years.

Outdoor weather conditions, especially during fall and spring use of the facility, create fog over the ice and condensation on safety panes. This led to cancellation of a Moosehead preseason game last year, costing both revenue and reputation. On numerous occasions, humidity has created a fog, which was so thick it was impossible to see more than a couple of feet.

More than once, hockey teams have complained about "poor ice" and that it never has been as good as the ice at Colchester Legion Stadium. In some communities heat generated from ice making operations is captured and used to heat other nearby buildings, thus reducing operational costs of the facility as it generates some income. Modern technology has also enabled steam to be used to generate electricity to be uploaded to an electrical grid or used in other municipal properties.

Speaking on the matter, Truro Mayor Bill Mills is also

disappointed by the situation, but finds some consolation in the growing success of the Centre. "We have a great facility that more and more community members are enjoying. It's a hard pill to swallow right now, but this is spending that will help us attract major international events and more visitors."

Several people, none of them connected to council, or staff of the two host municipalities, who have significant knowledge about the situation, and experience with compressors, ice-making and protecting the integrity of a building, feel the \$532,000 dehumidification program may solve the humidity problem, but will not solve the overall problems related to the ice making equipment and energy costs.

A joint meeting of the Town and County Councils on Thursday, December 15th considered options for funding the work. Truro and Colchester Councils will decide in January whether to invest in a dehumidification upgrade for the Rath Eastlink Community Centre as recommended by its Board of Directors.

There is no approval for accepting the tender and proceeding with the work.

However, we do not have very many options. We have a huge investment that we must protect.

Tom Taggart,
Councillor District 10 has been on
Colchester Council since 2008.

The
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Journal

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