

North Hatley Mayor: "It's not a done deal"

By Matthew McCully

North Hatley residents raised concerns that the Memphremagog MRC's recently adopted flood plain management plan was laying the groundwork for a large condo development despite uproar from citizens, wanting the project scaled down.

North Hatley Mayor Michael Page told The Record that the development laid out in the flood management plan was not tailored to suit the project proposed by Richard Laliberté to council and the community in 2014.

"This is still all up in the air," Page said.

The mayor first pointed out that just because an area is declared a flood zone, does not mean there can be no building on it. The area in question, near the centre of town by the municipal parking lot, currently has buildings on it, including the town's former hardware store, as well as some abandoned homes, he said.

What the MRC has presented to the ministry of sustainable development, according to Page, is a management plan that includes the maximum develop-

ment that North Hatley council would be willing to allow in that area.

"It's not tailored to him (Laliberté)," commented Page, insisting the plan was designed to suit North Hatley and what the town needs to ensure a viable future.

Page said that even before Laliberté entered the picture, two Montreal universities visited North Hatley to analyze the town and make recommendations.

"It's not sustainable to stay as is," Page said.

The recommendations in the report suggested that a revitalization of the centre of town would be beneficial.

"We're not that big," Page said, explaining that geographically speaking, the village is three square kilometres.

Without the space for any major industry, Page said the livelihood of North Hatley essentially lies in taxes and tourism. With the population decreasing, the cost of living and tax rate increases, Page said.

"We're always asked, what are you going to do about it?" he said.

The solution was clear to council that increasing the tax base was the answer.

Page said that when Laliberté began

buying up the properties in the centre of town, in an effort to be transparent, he was asked to offer a proposal of the type of development he would like to undertake.

"That got things stirred up," Page said, when a presentation was held in 2014.

As it stands, town council is moving forward with the steps to allow development of the property, but Page said that what the development will be, and who will undertake the project remains to be seen.

Once the zoning is amended, Page said the land value will be worth more. There is nothing keeping Laliberté from selling to another developer and walking away, or presenting an entirely different development project to council for review.

"We've tried not to be influenced by him," Page said, while developing the flood management plan.

The ultimate goal is to have a development of some sort, but the specifics are still to be determined, according to Page.

Page said council will have to consider

what size project would be required to be profitable for the town. He acknowledged opposition groups' suggestions that a 130-unit development would be just right for the town.

"Where are they getting that number from?" he wondered.

"We do want feedback from the citizens," Page went on, "but constructive criticism, in a respectful way."

Page said that there are still opportunities for residents to share their views as the process moves forward.

The ministry of sustainable development is expected to render an opinion on the flood management plan by Feb. 14 at which point a public consultation will take place before entering into effect.

The next step will be a Plan Particulier d'Urbanisme (PPU), which will also involve public consultation.

A citizen with concerns regarding the flood management plan discussed in this article sent a letter to the minister of sustainable development for consideration while reviewing the flood plan. The letter also came to The Record for consideration as a letter to the editor. It is published on Page 6.