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Photo by Alisa Howlett

Andrew Rusnyk, the new general manager at Batawa Ski Hill: "It has been very important for us to maintain the feel of community here."

Batawa ski hill makes some big changes

By Alisa Howlett

From a rope tow driven by a truck, to a T-bar, and now fully operating chairlifts, Batawa Ski Hill has come a long way, new general manager Andrew Rusnyk says.

The Batawa Development Corporation purchased the ski hill six years ago, and with that a lot of changes followed. Over the past year the ski hill gained a new management team, including Rusnyk only two months ago. But new management is not all the hill gained.

Since the ownership was changed from a volunteer organization to a corporation, Batawa has been able to provide new and

improved services, Rusnyk said.

This year, snow is being made earlier than ever with the help of a new snow-making system and snow-grooming equipment. High-efficiency LED lights are being installed on hills that were not previously lit, allowing night skiing.

Rusnyk said the new team is coming together and making it happen.

"The biggest thing for us is the new team we have in place here," he said. "We have been able to prepare the hill despite the renovations going on. The hill is in the best ready condition it has ever been."

Founded by the Bata Shoe Organiza-

tion in 1966, for most of its existence the hill has primarily been operated by volunteers. Over the years, the surrounding community has been very supportive, said Rusnyk.

"It has been very important for us to maintain the feel of community here, to make sure that people feel they are apart of the ski hill. They are a guest. They are an essential part of it."

The rental shop and guest-services building are also undergoing renovations. The improvements are designed to make the hill operate more efficiently.

But with all the recent changes, Rusnyk wants the atmosphere of Batawa to

stay the same.

"In absolutely no way do we want to become sort of a corporate feel that you'll see at some of the other ski hills, the bigger hills where people become numbers going through a turnstile. That will never happen here. That is not the direction we want to go," he said. "We want to maintain the social side of the ski hill. We want to maintain that feel and that comfort there. It is critical for us."

Many volunteer-operated ski hills don't last for financial reasons. It's great to have the support of the Batawa Development Corporation to keep this going, Rusnyk said.

Although the new corporation has taken over, Batawa still runs on the work of many volunteers.

"We still survive on (volunteer) help, their participation and their support. The volunteers are a massive part of the history in place, but are also still a part of the existence right now," he said.

Even with all of the recent changes, Batawa's objectives remain the same: fun, safety, and accessibility for everyone, Rusnyk said.

The new management hopes to have the hill open for Dec. 14.

For more information: batawaskihill.com.



Photo by Tyson Leonard

Joyce Welsh, a volunteer with Gleaners Food Bank, hands out fresh grapes from the Niagara region.

Foodbanks and farmers work together

Farmers will now be able to receive tax receipts for food bank donations

By Tyson Leonard

When people think of the local food movement, images of farmers' markets, artisan cheese and heirloom organic produce often come to mind.

But Louise Livingstone of Harvest Hastings, a group that supports and promotes agriculture in Hastings County, says the movement is about more than what's on the menus of fancy restaurants.

"There is a spot of disconnect between lovely local food in restaurants and the fact that we've got farmers here that can produce food, but we've got a lot of people here that aren't getting enough," Livingstone said.

The Local Foods Act recently passed by the Ontario government is an attempt to address that issue.

The legislation gives farmers a tax credit of 25 per cent of the fair market value of any food they donate to community food programs.

Livingstone said the tax credit might help, but it's not enough.

"I think all too often farmers are expected to donate. Now that there's the new legislation and they can get a tax relief on donations, that changes things a bit – but a lot of the farmers in this area, especially the small farmers, are struggling to make a living," she said.

"If people can't earn enough to buy food for themselves, and farmers can't earn enough to survive, tax credits are not going to make much difference."

The government needs to look at the issue within a larger context, she said.

"It's not just tax receipts for farmers for food banks ... you have to look at food banks in the whole context of food security."

Livingstone suggested that the government focus more on improving programs such as Ontario Works and the Ontario Disability Support Program so that people don't need food banks in the first place.

Suzanne Quinlan, the executive director of Gleaners Food Bank on Wallbridge Crescent in Belleville, says she is hopeful that the new legislation will help stock the Gleaners' shelves with local produce.

Until now, farmers have received nothing in return for donating their products to food banks, she noted. "Anything we receive from the farmers, they get no credit at all. And we still re-

ceive some, but this might be an incentive for some, as this is a farming area."

Quinlan said that since she took over as Gleaners' executive director in 2002, she has been on a campaign to increase the amount of local produce on its shelves. At the outset, she noticed a lack of food quality that could be fixed by buying local, she said.

"I looked at what we were providing clients, and it was like chicken dogs. And I was thinking, 'You know, it's a factory from Bramalea and it's not a good product.' Local people, including the farmers, donate to Gleaners, so why would we spend our money buying something from Bramalea? We should spend our money locally."

She has strengthened the food bank's partnership with Harvest Hastings and has started an organic garden at Gleaners.

"We try to have some form of fresh produce. Right now we have tomatoes and grapes, and we ran out of potatoes so I'll be going down to the market to buy 10 50-pound bags," she said.

Gleaners has months' worth of food on hand thanks to its last food drive in October, but the food bank is continually in need of fresh, healthy local produce, Quinlan said.

Dick Ellis arena goes to gymnastics club

By Kristen Oelschlagel

After what seemed like a never-ending debate, the Quinte Bay Gymnastics Club finally owns the Dick Ellis Arena.

On Tuesday night, Belleville city council voted in favour of selling the arena at 18 Harder Dr. to the club.

The deal includes the city giving a \$450,000 mortgage to the club, with the money to be used for renovations to the arena. The city will also get back the club's current building at 18 Yeoman St., the Ben Blecker building.

Mayor Neil Ellis is calling the deal a win for the city.

"When you look at it we're actually making money on the mortgage, we're providing (sports services to the city) through this club, we're enabling (the club) to have a bigger facility, we're getting land back that's more valuable to us because we own the parcel around it, whereas (with) the Dick Ellis we just own the building. For us it's a great deal."

The question of the \$450,000 mortgage to the gymnastics club had caused the issue to be tabled during the Oct. 28 council meeting, when council asked for a review of the club's financial statements. A chartered accountant subsequently reviewed the club's financials and that the recommendation was made to go ahead with the deal.

Not every councillor agreed with the decision, though.

Councillor Garnett Thompson said it's not the city's business to be a lender.

"There are the financial institutions out there that do lend money. My concern is, should we be having those agen-

cies investigate that avenue first? If there's a concern and we want to make a deal, maybe we can re-look at it again if they can't get funding from the bank, but that's what they're in business for. We're in business, as one of the other councillors said, of governing."

But Mayor Ellis said he's fully confident in the decision, citing the city's previous mortgage to the club for the Blecker building.

"Over the course of the last 15 years, they've made every payment. They haven't been late for a payment ... they've been an exceptional mortgagee," said Ellis.

Other details of the deal include the gymnastics club paying the city \$125,000 cash and the city allowing the club to stay in its current building rent-free for six months while renovations are being done to the arena.

Ellis said that he is hoping talks with the Quinte Exhibition and Raceway will result in the exhibition being moved from the land in question, either so that it uses just the west side of Sidney Street or, preferably, moves out of the central city completely.

There is already a restaurant chain looking to purchase the land.

Bob Doyle, the franchise holder of most of the Belleville McDonald's outlets, confirmed that the corporation has been in talks with the city. Doyle said McDonald's is very interested in purchasing the land but so far no offer has been made.

If McDonald's was to buy land on that block, it would be no more than two acres, he said.

Holiday Train coming to Belleville

By Katy Burley

The annual Holiday Train is on its way.

The CP Holiday Train started back in 1999 with just a few lights on a freight train stopping in just a handful of communities. Now, the tradition involves hundreds of thousands of lights and a live show featuring well-known performers.

The "holiday on wheels" will be arriving in

Belleville at approximately 1:30 p.m. on Nov. 28. The train will arrive just south of the hospital on Keegan Parkway in Bayshore Park.

Everyone who plans to attend is asked to bring non-perishable food and money donations which will stay in their community.

This event has helped raise over \$7.4 million and over three million pounds of food in Canada and the U.S.