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Exeter Lakeshore

Times-Advance



Exeter writer and researcher Bonnie Sitter was honoured by the municipality at the Dec. 1 South Huron council meeting for her work co-authoring a book on Ontario's Second World War-era Farmerettes, as well as the recent documentary, *We Lend a Hand*, based on her work. Sitter was given a key to the municipality and has been named a 'Hometown Hero.' From left are councillors Marissa Vaughan and Wendy McLeod-Haggitt, Deputy Mayor Jim Dietrich, Sitter, Mayor George Finch and councillors Milt Dietrich, Ted Oke and Aaron Neeb. *SCOTT NIXON*

'HOMETOWN HERO'

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Exeter's Bonnie Sitter deemed a 'Hometown Hero'

SCOTT NIXON

EXETER South Huron council has declared Exeter writer and researcher Bonnie Sitter a "Hometown Hero," handing her a symbolic key to the municipality.

Sitter appeared at the Dec. 1 council meeting to talk about the documentary, *We Lend a Hand*, which is based on a 2019 book she co-authored with Shirley English called *Onion Skins and Peach Fuzz: Memories of Ontario Farmerettes*. The book tells the true stories of teenage girls who left home to work on farms during the Second World War to help with the labour shortage caused by the conflict.

The work was later developed into a play by Alison Lawrence that was performed at the Blyth Festival and the 4th Line Theatre in Millbrook in the summer of 2024.

Sitter's work and determination also inspired Canada Post to honour the Farmerettes with a special Remembrance Day stamp in the fall of 2024. Senator Robert Blackspoke about the subject in the Senate on Oct. 31, 2024, and acknowledged Sitter's efforts.

We Lend a Hand, directed by London filmmaker Colin Field, has been screened more than 70 times since its premiere in April, has been invited to 21 film festivals and won "at least seven awards," Sitter told council.

French subtitles are being added to the film so it can be shown at the Juno Beach Centre in France.

Sitter has previously said the making of the documentary represented a dream come true for her, and she told council she thinks it could be the basis of a television series and musical.

It all started for Sitter in January 2018, when she found a tiny picture from her husband's family farm, which had hired Farmerettes in the Thedford area. There were no names accompanying the photo, but the back contained the words: "Farmerettes, about 1946." Sitter began researching the topic, wrote an article that was printed in a farm publication and eventually connected with former London Free Press journalist English, herself a former Farmerette in 1952 on the Sitter farm. The two then collaborated on their book.

English died in August at the age of 89.

An estimated 40,000 girls participated in the Farmerette program from 1941 to 1952, and Sitter said they were paid the going rate for farm labour at the time, which was 25 cents an hour. Out of that, the girls paid \$4.50 a week for room, board and meals.

Mayor George Finch thanked Sitter for her work.

"Had it not been for you, this chapter of Canadian history would have been lost forever, and the stories of these incredible young Canadian women lost to history," he said.

Coun. Aaron Neeb, a teacher at Clinton's Central Huron secondary school, said he recently showed the documentary to his Grade 10 history class.

"It's very impactful," he said of the film. "Generally, when we talk about the First World War and the Second World War, we're really focused on battles and not so much on the effect that the war had on the home front and the effect that it had on children and teenagers."

He said it's important to keep in mind the sacrifices everyone made during war efforts.

Finch presented Sitter with a key to the municipality and read her a statement naming her as a "Hometown Hero."

"Thank you for your vision, perseverance and love of community," Finch read from a certificate presented to Sitter. "Your work stands as a lasting testament to the power of one person's dedication to make history live again. . . . Your commitment to uncovering historical truth has made you a true South Huron Hometown Hero."

Finch said Sitter is the first recipient of a municipal key in South Huron.

Huron Health System recommends creation of South Huron recruitment fund for doctors

SCOTT NIXON

SOUTH HURON The municipality is being encouraged by Huron Health System (HHS) to offer financial incentives to help recruit doctors to the area.

Jimmy Trieu, president and CEO of HHS, which oversees Exeter's South Huron Hospital and Goderich's Alexandra Marine and General Hospital, attended South Huron's Dec. 1 council meeting and recommended the municipality establish a \$50,000 interest-free housing loan program to attract doctors to the region.

Council made no decision at the Dec. 1 meeting but typically discusses such requests at future sessions.

Trieu said there are physician shortages across the province, particularly in smaller communities. He attributed that to an aging population and a limited talent pipeline, as well as competition that sees hospitals offering monetary and other incentives to recruit doctors.

Historically, Trieu said non-monetary incentives for doctors in South Huron have been successful, including lifestyle and community integration, but noted many smaller communities across the province are now "putting money on the table" to recruit physicians.

"It doesn't guarantee that you will be able to recruit that physician, but what it does guarantee is that they will look at your community and see what the community has to offer and it might entice them to come to the community," Trieu said. "Without monetary incentives, it's very difficult to get physicians to become interested in a community, so that's kind of where our disadvantage is."

Some incentives are offered at HHS, including the province's Northern Rural Recruitment

and Retention Initiative that offers grants of about \$85,000 for physicians who come to smaller communities. HHS also offers six months rent-free for clinic space in the medical centre (valued at \$10,000) and moving expenses of up to \$10,000.

Trieu is recommending South Huron establish a \$50,000 interest-free loan fund for newly recruited physicians to support home purchases in the community. It's suggested the loan would be forgivable in full or in part if the doctor remains in the community beyond a set term. If the doctor relocates before the end of the term, the municipality would have the right to reclaim the loaned amount, with the home as collateral.

Trieu said Goderich council has approved a \$50,000 house purchasing incentive to recruit physicians in that community.

"Most recently, in November we were actually able to recruit our ninth physician, and they were deciding between Clinton and Goderich, and because of this \$50,000 incentive that the Town of Goderich approved, we were able to secure that physician, so that in turn helps with the care that's provided within the community," he said.

Trieu said physicians typically tend to stay in communities once they decide to work there.

The HHS recommendation said that establishing a housing loan incentive would "position South Huron as a serious contender for top medical talent and ensure our residents continue to receive the health care they deserve."

Trieu also commended Mayor George Finch for creating a task force on regional health care that consists of councillors Marissa Vaughan, Ted Oke and Wendy McLeod-Haggitt.