

We

did it!

Community's share of healthcare projects finally is paid off

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Editor

When Haliburton accountant Hugh Nichol crunched all the numbers and came up with the final fundraising figure of \$6-million, some skeptics told him that the people of Haliburton County could never raise that much money, no matter how good the cause.

But as chairman of Haliburton Highlands Health Services, Nichol not only believed in the community, he also believed in the project — upgrading Hyland Crest and adding a new emergency department in Minden as well as upgrading the Haliburton Hospital to accommodate 13 acute care beds and adding a 30-bed long-term care unit.

The entire project would cost \$19.8 million and the province had to be convinced that the county could commit to its share: \$6 million. It was the largest fundraising campaign anyone in the Highlands had even dared to contemplate.

But Nichol and fellow HHHS members held firm.

"We couldn't afford not to do it," he says. Without modern healthcare facilities, Haliburton County would not be able to thrive and prosper. Not only would people not want to move here but our older residents would have to move elsewhere because of the lack of adequate facilities.

Yesterday, Nichol presented the HHHS Foundation with a cheque for \$100 to ceremonial-

When construction starts, people's faith is restored

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ly mark the end of the long but ultimately successful capital campaign. The cheque was in honour of all the HHHS board members who didn't live long enough to see the \$6 million debt finally paid off.

Nichol had predicted the money could be raised in 10 years. He was bang on. Approval for the projects was granted in 1997, with construction starting the next September.

"Six million dollars is a lot of dough for our little towns but it never crossed my mind we'd never get it," says Don Popple who, along with Ray Selbie, is one of two original Foundation members still on the board today.

Selbie says the Foundation, which Nichol established as one of his four goals as HHHS chairman, knew it couldn't count on many large donations to pull it off. "We knew it would be on the backs of ordinary people."

But it wasn't just the size of community's share of the costs that provided a daunting challenge. A decade earlier a campaign to raise money for an 18-bed long-term care unit in Haliburton had come to a controversial end when the province rescinded its approval. People were angry and cynical. After putting their hearts into the previous campaign, how could they be sure that this one would lead anywhere?

That was one of the reasons HHHS decided to borrow the community's share up front. By not having to wait for the fundraising campaign to reach its goal, construction could start immediately. And once people saw the additions going up, their faith in the future of healthcare in Haliburton County would be restored. They'd match their faith with their donations.

"No one was going to give any money until they saw

the backhoes," Nichol says.

Having construction begin right away also buried any chances that the province would renege on the project again, although that didn't seem likely this time around. The HHHS had a strong ally at Queen's Park: MPP Chris Hodgson.

Hodgson had grown up in Haliburton and knew the history of the project well; in fact, he'd been chairman of the steering committee that was the precursor of the HHHS. Hodgson also knew how healthcare threatened to pit Haliburton and Minden against one another. Minden feared losing its hospital, an old frame building that nonetheless served as a vital emergency facility along the busy Hwy. 35 corridor. It was important to Hodgson that any solution took in Minden's needs as well as Haliburton's, even though few other counties would ever dream of having two healthcare facilities only 24 kilometres apart.

It helped, of course, that Hodgson was not only the area's MPP. At the time he was also Chairman of the Management Board of Cabinet and, as such, had a great deal of influence when it came to deciding how the province's money would be spent.

"If we didn't have the government [on side] we weren't going anywhere," says Don Popple, who believes that "if we didn't get [provincial backing] when we did, we wouldn't have got anything. We wouldn't be sitting in these buildings today."

Selbie agrees. "If Chris had not been here we'd never have gotten anywhere."

Negotiations between Nichol and Hodgson began in



CASEY LESSARD/ECHO

Don Popple, chairman of the Haliburton Highlands Health Services Foundation's capital campaign, accepts a ceremonial final cheque from former HHHS board chairman Hugh Nichol. Nichol made the donation on behalf of HHHS board members who worked hard to get Haliburton County the healthcare facilities it needed but didn't live to see this proud day.

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