

## Putting poverty on the agenda

"Poverty is a complex issue." It's practically a cliché.

However, the phrase is an important one to keep in mind — providing it's used as a qualifying statement, not an excuse to ignore the problem.

Will poverty be a hot topic during North Dundas' next municipal election? There was no indication that it would be, until Tues., May 25, when Pauline Pratt approached council and assertively asked them to consider making poverty a priority before voters head to the polls on Mon., Oct. 25.

The executive director of the House of Lazarus was almost certainly speaking directly to the three politicians at the table who have filed to run again — Mayor Alvin Runnalls, Deputy-Mayor Estella Rose, and Councillor Eric Duncan. (Councillors Al Armstrong and John Thompson had yet to declare their intentions publicly before press time this week.)

Specifically, Pratt wants to develop a comprehensive poverty reduction strategy involving community organizations, all levels of government, and the public.

Well, now's as good a time as any.

Pratt has spent a lot of time thinking about why some local residents are poor, and what factors kick them when they're down.

The House of Lazarus helps our community's "invisible" citizens get through the worst episodes in their lives. The mission provides fire victims with clothing the day after their homes burn to the ground. It gives food baskets when the (usually humiliated) breadwinners can't feed their brood, for whatever reason — a messy divorce, domestic violence, a job loss, or reduced income due to an illness, like cancer.

Indeed, it's easy to say that the House of Lazarus provides core, even crucial services to our community.

Except there's one problem. The House of Lazarus is not a government agency. It's a faith-based charity. It's a bandaid, a resource established by kind-hearted people who felt obliged to pick up the pieces after government, the economy, and, yes, personal responsibility failed to provide.

Sometimes we need to fix a faulty system, even if it's easier in the short term to clean up the mess it leaves behind.

Winchester and the surrounding community have a reputation for being generous.

But sometimes, are we too generous? Flip through the *Winchester Press* on any given week, and you'll find news reports and pictures recognizing all sorts of donations. Whether it's service clubs, churches, schools, or businesses, these organizations (and their supporters) are always plugging holes and filling gaps in the social fabric. For example, the Winchester District Memorial Hospital is in the middle of a \$5-million fundraising campaign to pay for hospital equipment, including a CT scanner. Apparently health care is not the province's responsibility anymore. To be clear, we're not suggesting that everyone stop supporting the Close to Home Campaign. But maybe, in the future, we should be asking first why equipment isn't funded by tax dollars, instead of obediently opening our wallets once more.

Another case in point: the Harmonized Sales Tax (HST). Ontario's New Democrats crunched some numbers and estimate that the HST will cost the average family about \$800 more per year.

The HST is a cleverly designed tax on the poor. Of course, more families will end up at the food bank each month after the price of everything from gasoline to funerals increases. Who will help the Dundas County Food Bank and House of Lazarus feed these people? Donors, of course.

Pratt's request last week appeared to catch some politicians off guard. But that's okay. The election is still in its infancy.

The nomination period only ends on Fri., Sept. 10, so there's plenty of time to see if anyone takes her up on the challenge. (Pratt was also scheduled to meet with the Township of South Dundas council after press time. Very likely, she'll make a similar request.)

Yes, poverty is a complex issue, and it's time to pick it apart at the local level.