

THUNDER BAY CHAMBER OF COMMERCE DEPUTATION TO COUNCIL RE: THUNDER BAY'S OFFICIAL PLAN

PRESENTED: MONDAY, JANUARY 23, 2012

Good evening and thank you for the opportunity to provide input this evening. My name is Michael Nitz, Chair of the Board of the Thunder Bay Chamber of Commerce. With me is Harold Wilson, Chamber President.

The Thunder Bay Chamber of Commerce represents over one thousand member businesses in Thunder Bay and surrounding area. We take pride in our role as the Voice of Business. Earlier today, we met with a group of local developers outlining our presentation and receiving excellent advice. We are very interested in seeing that the next Official Plan is implemented to maximize benefits to the City, the business community, and the taxpayers.

The Chamber supports sustainability, and a balance between places to work, live and play. However, we would contend that the City is currently out of balance leaving Chamber members unable to find commercial and/or industrial space for development. This situation means an even greater challenge for business investment attraction from outside our community. There is a need for new commercial and industrial development to supplement a shrinking tax base. Our Official Plan must provide needed space for several key areas currently leading our economic future growth in our community, such as the knowledge-based and mining sectors. This means jobs.

One area that needs to be highlighted is Innova Business Park. This park features dedicated light industrial land, with recently improved access, geared to companies of 40 or more employees that we need. The fact that it has languished is due to a combination of development agreements that turned off companies that were considering purchasing land, as well as the low demand over the past decade. However, recently this circumstance has begun to change. Moreover, the trend is starting where growing businesses from the Balmoral area are considering moving to Innova, freeing up smaller and more fragmented commercial properties in the Balmoral area.

Notwithstanding, there must be additional options. In order for the City to grow and take advantage of future opportunities, the Official Plan must offer a clear plan for the creation of new serviced lots designated for commercial and industrial purposes. We have heard that the City will also be considering development charges in the near future. Prior to any movement on that, we would request a thorough engagement of the business community. We are your investors, your developers. The Chamber asks Council when encouraging development, we also suggest the City look beyond its own holdings.

The Official Plan also provides an excellent opportunity for a discussion on incentives for developers who are creating mixed uses through infill land and/or buildings. However, please note that infilling is not without infrastructure investment and servicing requirements; every lot is a challenge.

The need for focused encouragement of affordable, multi-tenant and multi-residential properties would also be a benefit to our community.

Other considerations might include commercial on main and housing on upper floors which could be encouraged. This could curb urban sprawl and lower costs related to servicing. More demolition of the eyesores could be a start.

Green spaces are integral to quality of life. Recreation opportunities at our doorstep are one of the major attractors for newcomers to our city. However, there is a need to recognize that not all undeveloped land is or should be preserved as green space. Balance should be the goal. There are a myriad of considerations, including transportation that must be taken into account in the Official Plan and we appreciate that balance is the watchword.

Outside of the particulars of the Official Plan, we ask Council to consider additional issues relating to investment attraction and business expansion.

There are broad growth challenges, including residential, ahead. As Thunder Bay is poised to grow, especially with a modest population increase (which we have not for several decades), the time to address any and all shortcomings in terms of approvals and two way communication is now; streamlining systems during a period of expansion will not work for either businesses or city administration.

Another key issue remains parking – we believe considerably more time and resources should be dedicated to this. The business owners in the core areas will certainly be grateful, both for their staff and customers, if the City works to address this comprehensively.

The Chamber extends an invitation to facilitate further discussion between City officials and the business community to ensure future business development opportunities are entrenched in the next Official Plan.

Lastly, the Chamber is prepared to support any lobbying efforts by the City where provincially mandated planning policies and regulations impede growth in Thunder Bay.

Thank you for your attention, and the opportunity to address Council this evening.