



Work continues on town's economic development plan

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EMC Business - Going out on a limb to achieve the economic development Smiths Falls wants to see is the only way to realize the type of commercial mix the Smiths Falls Economic Development Advisory Board (EDAB) envisions.

During the most recent brainstorming session for the Economic Development Plan, Irv Mazurkiewicz's proposal to send direct sales pitches to CEOs of companies the community feels will be a good fit for the town was strongly supported by his board peers.

"I think it's fantastic myself," remarked town councillor Rob Peters.

Members felt businesses in cities where high taxes and cost of living are issues should top the list. This idea is all part of the board's overall focus on creative thinking when it comes to finding solutions to the current economic situation in town.

"If we are going to think outside the box we've got to be creative on how we do that," Mazurkiewicz said.

Board chair Roger Cooke identified the creative economy approach as the number one objective in economic development going forward. The need to clearly understand and identify Smiths Falls' quality lifestyle is paramount before approaching outside businesses.

"Smiths Falls has so much to offer right now, I don't know if we need to give a lot to get a lot," commented Tim Lee.

Encouraging current residents and business owners to see the attributes of their own community was listed as a main objective of the economic development plan going forward. The notion of every resident becoming a town ambassador was echoed at the meeting, but Gord Hicks, newly appointed Chamber board representative, pointed out the community needs to clearly understand what the town's goals and needs are before they can be confident ambassadors. This is particularly true for business ambassadors who regularly meet entrepreneurs in their work.

ONLY PART OF VISION

The effort to attract new business is only part of the board's vision for a strong economic community for Smiths Falls. Isabelle Belot-Graveline of Kilmarnock Enterprises emphasized the need to reach out to members of the current business community for their perspective, ideas and concerns.

"I think we really need to galvanize the thoughts and ideas that are out there," she said.

She encouraged the continuation of the business visitation program that is already under way by town staff. The issue of whether the new economic plan will include acceptance of the town's current economic initiatives or whether it will focus entirely on future projects was looked at as well. Elaine Mallory, director of administrative and planning services, put forward the idea of including a supportive paragraph of the town's current work, saying every year the town has the opportunity to shift focus, approve or deny the economic development office's budget.

"I'd like to see that incorporated in the economic development plan," Mallory added. "It's an objective that I'd like to keep."

The current economic development line in this year's draft budget is about \$200,000. This includes administration, the VIA station work and the Lanark North-Leeds Enterprise Centre.

Another key objective highlighted at the meeting included transportation. The ability to move people around (commuter rail) as well as move product is critical for many businesses. Hicks said he's having to wait longer between product orders since Hershey closed. The transportation company would often place two orders on a transportation truck if it was going to the same town. Since Smiths Falls has lost Hershey and its demand on the transportation system, existing business owners have

noticed that wait times between orders can be as much as two weeks when it used to be just a few days.

"It's made a heck of a difference in the way you run your business," Hicks said.

He would like to see some strategies in the plan to address this need.

Councillor Ken Graham highlighted the importance of the regional airport when it comes to attracting new business and supporting the economy in general.

"We can't lose sight of how important air transportation is to economic development," he added. "It's a gem."

Jim Riva, who has recently been hired on as the town's new marketing assistant, said having adequate transportation in the way of buses or trains for individuals is very important for tourism, residential and business growth.

"To me it's a critical objective that will help with residential attraction and business attraction," Riva said.

Addressing the retention of young talent as well as labour needs in general are focuses, which may become strong objectives in the town's developing Economic Development Plan.

"It was the number one thing we identified at our Queen's (university) session," Cooke said.

PARTNERSHIPS

Creating the partnerships between educational institutions in the community and local businesses is seen as an important step going forward. Peters said the focus of this objective should be to create the opportunity for youth to use the talents they have close to home so they can choose to leave or stay close to the area.

"Smiths Falls may not be the only choice but let it be one of the choices," Peters said.

This brought back the idea from the previous meeting of keeping a database of local graduates and their specialties so that they can be emailed if a local opportunity for employment becomes available.

"All you need is one or two to come back every year and it pays for the system," Cooke said.

Another critical objective that was discussed is the downtown. This objective looks not only at the beautification element of the core, but also at the mix of commercial interests there. Peters said it's important for the businesses in the downtown to be able to draw visitors from outside the community and to work together to provide more than one stop for out-of-town visitors.

He added the importance of the downtown to the spirit of the community can't be overstated.

"Every time there's a major event it typically gravitates to the downtown," he said.

John Doherty, executive director of Valley Heartland Community Futures Development Corporation, noted there are programs available to support downtown cores.

Any objectives that move from the discussion phase to a draft version of the plan will include a suggested lead organization for each strategy/task. It was agreed that any organizations identified within the plan would be invited to a future EDAB meeting to discuss the recommendations and their feasibility.

The board will meet at least one more time before Queen's University facilitators return in May to review the objectives set out and to assist in identifying strategies for each point.

Between then and now, Lee asked to see some statistical information that would let the board members know where they are on their objectives and what needs are outstanding.

"They're all good objectives, but if it was me as a businessman, I'd say what is my estimated return," Lee said.

Members felt this question will be answered during the upcoming Queen's session.