

Key issues now facing Dufferin aired at Board of Trade levee

Written By **PETER RICHARDSON**

A large audience was on hand at Monora Park Pavilion last Thursday for the Dufferin Board of Trade's annual New Year's Levee, which featured an exchange of politicians' views on key issues facing the county.

The event began at 8 a.m. with a tasty breakfast prepared by Lavender Blue Catering followed by a stirring rendition of O Canada, performed by Maddy Rose.

After Dufferin-Caledon MP David Tilson provided some opening remarks, Board Chairman Pete Renshaw introduced all of the municipal councillors present.

Dufferin-Caledon MPP Sylvia Jones was also to have spoken, but was at Queen's Park for a Progressive Conservative caucus meeting.

After a short coffee break and a networking session, Mr. Renshaw again stepped to the microphone to pose some questions to a panel of mayors in attendance.

The first question posed concerned the importance of collaboration between the various lower-tier municipalities and the County.

All of the panel felt that collaboration was the only way to proceed and advance, deeming it the only way to avoid a forced amalgamation.

Orangeville Mayor Sandy Brown stressed the need to promote tourism, with all the participants working together to promote the entire region. It was also noted that some form of public transit is a definite need for the region.

Next up was a query concerning the expectation of businesses and residents for accountability from the municipalities and how they would provide it.

Mayor Brown said transparency was a penultimate. He mentioned the new Town of Orangeville website and also the Town's social media footprint as ways to keep the public in the loop.

Shelburne Mayor Wade Mills felt that a comprehensive Strategic Plan was a key tool in keeping the public informed and County Council on track. It would act as a road map for the Council and allow progress to be tracked by the residents, who would then see what was being accomplished.

Warden Darren White, mayor of Melancthon, voiced the opinion that a solid Economic Development Plan has led to greater transparency, while Mono Mayor Laura Ryan was keen on citizen engagement. She felt that the more involved the public were in the governmental process, the more they would understand what was happening. She suggested taking councils 'on the road' rather than remaining in council chambers and possibly putting council meetings on YouTube.

Question three posed by the Chair was dear to everyone's heart, dealing with the implementation of High-Speed Broadband Internet in Dufferin.

Mayor Ryan stated that the lack of upper-tier governments' support is a major stumbling block. There appeared to be a disconnect with no one working together on this staple requirement. She stated that high tech is not coming to Dufferin County and this is hurting the region. Adding to this was the exorbitantly high cost involved.

Warden White pointed out that the County has been deeply involved with the SWIFT initiative and has commitments from the federal and provincial governments for the initiative. Unfortunately, the provincial government had recently backed away from SWIFT, stating that they are going to bring in their own high-speed plan.

Although Sylvia Jones had told him the Ford government took the action because SWIFT was a long way from arriving in Dufferin, the Warden said his understanding is that SWIFT would be implemented here in a year barring any upper-tier delays.

Mayor Mills said the importance of this can not be ignored and that the lack of it is negating the other benefits of life in Dufferin County.

Mayor Brown pointed out that the railway corridor through Orangeville could potentially be used as a tech corridor as well.

Next dealt with was the question of attracting talented workers. The opinions were varied as to the responsibilities of the municipalities. In Mayor Ryan's mind, training is the big stumbling block. Supply was simply not keeping up with the demand, causing employers to have to search out workers, and the lack of local transportation only exaggerated the problem.

Warden White said finding qualified workers is the number two problem in Dufferin County and larger training facilities locally are needed.

Mayor Mills saw education about the value and opportunities of trades as a key component and said that the time to reach young people and their parents was in secondary school. Mayor Brown agreed, stating that skilled trades are in huge demand and are extremely well-paid members of the community. One of the advantages of tradesmen was that they could not be easily outsourced like tech can. No one can have their plumber or electrician living in India or Southeast Asia. However, to retain these workers, the communities must be desirable places to live and work in..

This led to the question of creating ?Live /Work? communities and what can be done to facilitate them.

Mayor Brown spoke to looking at the Town's Official Plan as a means of attracting business as well as maintaining the cultural and heritage aspects of a community. One solution would be to lower tax rates for business so as to attract larger corporations to the area.

Mayor Mills said Shelburne, as people knew, was the fastest growing community in Ontario. With a 39% growth in recent years, the town was becoming simply a bedroom community due to the lack of high-paying jobs available. Most people were looking for a Live/Work/Play environment, but could not find it at present. He stressed the need to seek a balance between residential growth and business proliferation.

Warden White says that public transit is high on the importance list, along with affordability and a lower cost of living. He noted that kids today are not moving out, but are staying at home due to the high cost of housing and the high cost of living. They simply can not get ahead on their own. He says the County and its municipalities need to address affordable housing.

For Mono, said Mayor Ryan, the issue is one of its seniors leaving for larger centres in which to retire. They were finding their homes too hard to maintain in Mono. One solution, to keeping residents working, was a home-based business, something the Mayor was well familiarized with as she has one and a very successful venture as well. She also noted that as our communities' residents age, the need for better health care is rising. Having to travel outside their communities to visit aging parents or other family was a source of stress which could be eased with more locally based care facilities.

During the public question and answer period that followed, a number of issues were addressed by the panel. One was how to scale up small businesses, and several suggestions came forth.

Mayor Brown suggested new technologies, such as mobile apps, offering new networking opportunities.

Mayor Mills said that although the Town of Shelburne cannot help financially, it provides other opportunities such as Boards of Trade, Economic Development Committees and Business Improvement Associations.

Next up was transit. Warden White proposed that, as a start, existing local resources could be amalgamated to provide bus service to and from Orangeville for Shelburne and Grand Valley. This could be done using the existing Orangeville buses.

Mayor Mills felt a multi-faceted approach between local partnerships and Metrolinx/Go Transit was the ultimate solution, while Mayor Brown said that Orangeville would need some upper-tier assistance to expand its services.

One point of contention from the attendees concerned an assertion that wages are on a par with those in the municipalities surrounding Dufferin. The comment was made that a regional paralegal could earn \$30-40,000 a year here, whereas in Toronto the starting wage was between \$50,000 and \$60,000.