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County focuses energy on economic development plan

By Peter Richardson

Wednesday, May 31, saw Mono Council Chambers filled to capacity as Dufferin County hosted an all Councils meeting to discuss the Dufferin County Economic Development Strategic Plan, as presented by John Tennant from the Global Investment Attraction Group, the consultants responsible for the study paper.

Prior to commencing, Michele Harris, Executive director of Headwaters Tourism, led the assembled Councillors in a spirited ice breaker quiz about Dufferin County Tourism facts and points of interest, that was enjoyed by all and won by the team of Dufferin County Warden Darren White.

The overall thrust of the presentation centred on the need for the County and the eight lower tier governments that comprise the County Council, to adopt a unified and comprehensive approach towards developing the economic health of Dufferin County.

This is the first county-wide Economic Development Strategy and Action Plan and is a ten year outlook overall with a three to five year action plan. The plan has been in development since December 2016.

The Plan centres on a few key elements that include the need for a unified Economic Development Strategy, for growing job opportunities within the County, for a growing resident labour force, the availability of Industrial and Commercial lands and buildings and Property taxes and Development incentives, as well as a fundamental requirement for high speed internet coverage.

The study highlighted how sectors from agriculture, retail and manufacturing, and right through to tourism, tech firms and students, are all adversely affected by the lack of high speed broadband service across the County. Unfortunately, as several communities have discovered in their efforts timbering high speed broadband to their residents, the reality is that this is an expensive undertaking and realistically is beyond the capability of any one municipality. A concentrated effort by all tiers of government will be required and still the technology is several years away.

This point, was brought up by several of the assembled councillors, including Shelburne's Walter Benotto, as the major drawback to developing commerce within the region.

Deputy Mayor of Mono Ken McGhee also pointed out that, from his viewpoint, infrastructure and in particular transportation was a major obstacle to sustained development in the County. As he sees it, companies that produce a physical product require the ability to get their product to market. With ?Just in Time Delivery? now the norm in manufacturing today, this means roads and railways are paramount to accomplishing not only the delivery of the materials, but the shipping of the finished goods.

At present, there is no railway in Dufferin and no prospect of one and the only two highways are #89 and #10, both of which are only two lane thoroughfares and heavily congested throughout much of the day.

Others, in attendance cited the lack of available land and the reliance on wells and septic systems for water and sewage as deterrents to some industries and commercial ventures. Amaranth Mayor Don McIver noted that although Amaranth has industrial land available, these are problems that they face in attracting tenants or developers.

The report drew attention to further weaknesses faced by the County currently and these affirmed the broadband and transportation issues but also noted the lack of rural natural gas distribution, which hampered farms from utilizing low cost energy for crop drying and heating, and the lack of public transit in the County. At present, only Orangeville has public buses and the Go Bus to Brampton only runs from Orangeville as well.

The report suggested that the County needed to hire a staff of three to oversee the economic development requirements of the County and to spearhead advocacy initiatives, on behalf of the County with potential economic partners and other levels of government.

There was some opposition to the increasing expenditures to include three employees, however the possible need for an overall coordinator and advocate was generally well received.

By the end of the discussion period, the general consensus among those present was that the study should continue as scheduled, with an eye to addressing those concerns raised and to addressing the agricultural heritage and realities of the County.

The largest areas of Dufferin County being rural, developing opportunities for farming and farm related investment, holds a strong place in the minds, of many of its rural councils and councillors.

They are seeing more and more younger residents leaving the County to seek opportunities elsewhere.

This trend is one that needs to be addressed and reversed if the rural communities are to survive and since Agro-Tourism is a growing market throughout Ontario, it is also related to the growth Tourism, within Dufferin County.

Tourism, at the moment, is a multi-million dollar contributor to the economy of Dufferin and further growth will only serve to benefit everyone concerned.