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Dufferin Board of Trade hosts annual State of Business in Dufferin breakfast

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LOCAL JOURNALISM INITIATIVE REPORTER

The Dufferin Board of Trade's annual State of Business breakfast on Jan. 22 brought local business leaders together to discuss taxes, housing, trade, and infrastructure.

Dufferin's mayors, Dufferin?Caledon MPP Sylvia Jones, and Dufferin?Caledon MP Kyle Seeback, delivered remarks at the gathering, which DBOT Executive Director Diana described as the organization's primary advocacy event.

?As the Board of Trade, we're the voice of business in Dufferin,? she said. ?We have a series of moderated questions? about how the provincial, federal, and municipal governments are all working to support the issues that our local businesses are facing this year.?

Seeback focused heavily on Canada?U.S. trade and the looming review of the CUSMA agreement, warning that recent rhetoric from U.S. President Donald Trump is a serious concern for the Canadian economy.

?Canada's economy is around 75 per cent trade, and 75 per cent of that is with the United States. We're in their top three trading partners,? he said. ?If you take out energy exports? trade with Canada's worth about three per cent of US GDP.?

?I think it should be all hands on deck. I know we've signaled in the Conservative Party our willingness to help in any way with any contacts we have to try and get this deal done, because it's critical to the economy, and I hope that it is going to be the number one focus of the government as of today,? Seeback added.

Seeback also addressed housing concerns, the importance of streamlining the process, and the need to support first-time buyers. He said that in Canada, housing faces two critical problems: the supply of houses and the speed at which construction is approved. He suggested removing HST on all home purchases to help incentivize buyers.

?I've heard from the Ontario Home Builders Association that the market could be in real trouble in the next six to eight months because people simply can't buy,? he said. ?That's why we've proposed taking the HST off all new homes under $1.3 million, which they said would be an amazing boost to help deal with the cost of new homes.?

?All three levels of government need to work together to make market housing more affordable, while also investing in non-market housing for people who wouldn't be in the market anyway,? Seeback added.

Jones also spoke at length about recent initiatives and concerns in Ontario.

She defended the province's move to standardize recycling rules across the province and shift costs back onto producers, emphasizing that the blue box system is, at its core, a residential program. She noted that while municipalities can offer additional services if they choose, the formal producer responsibility framework will remain focused on household waste.

?This is really returning back to that producer responsibility,? she said of blue box changes. ?The blue box was? started as a residential program, and that really is the roots of where the focus is.?

When asked whether there are any new, positive initiatives being put forward at the Ministry of Health, Jones highlighted recent investments in local healthcare, including the new MRI at Headwaters and a province-wide push to expand access to family medicine through team-based care.

She said Ontario's $2.1 billion primary care initiative is designed to attach hundreds of thousands more patients to regular providers by funding multidisciplinary teams, which are multiple different practitioners that operate under one banner, to offer more streamlined service to patients, rather than bouncing them between different clinics.

?Many communities are talking about the need for primary care and primary care expansion,? she said. ?So there's a lot of interest in the $2.1 billion investment that we have set aside to expand and fund primary care teams. New grads love working in interdisciplinary teams, and of course, patients get better outcomes.?

In the mayors' panel, municipal funding and property taxes dominated the discussion.

Orangeville Mayor Lisa Post said the current funding model is broken, noting that municipalities receive only a small share of the overall tax dollar while carrying major infrastructure responsibilities.

?Out of every dollar you pay in taxes, only 11 cents actually stays with the municipality,? she said. ?The rest of it is paid in either federal or provincial taxes, so we are wildly underfunded for the work that we need to do.?

Mono Mayor John Creelman agreed.

?I think the model for funding municipalities is severely broken,? he said. ?It's unsustainable to expect ratepayers, property taxpayers, to fund the majority of municipal services. It cannot go on. Something's got to change.?

Shelburne Mayor Wade Mills stressed that municipalities are facing the same inflationary pressures as residents while trying to maintain services.

?It costs us more this year to provide the same level of service than it did last year,? he said. ?We have to walk a fine line? we don't want taxes to be so high that (people) can't afford those items? but? we have to make sure that the services that they rely upon are going to be there when they need them.?

While the panel of mayors acknowledged these challenges, they also focused on some positive initiatives as well to balance out the session.

Mayor Lisa Post highlighted Orangeville's free transit and its success in increasing bus ridership.

?One of the things that our council is most proud of is our implementation of free transit,? she said. ?It's an innovative program that has really supported businesses, community members and everybody. It's been wildly successful, we're seeing about a 250 per cent increase in ridership.?

Mayor Wade Mills highlighted progress in Shelburne as well, particularly in utilities and recreation.

?We have made record investments over the last three years in the Parks and Rec sphere,? he said. ?We've done it strategically so that most of that money has come from reserves. If you've been through Shelburne lately, you'll see lots of projects going on, and I'm hoping that those are all going to be things that our community can enjoy for years to come. We (also) have some great partnerships and cooperation with our provincial partners in terms of movement on the wastewater plant.?

Taken together, the morning underscored both the challenges and the opportunities facing Dufferin.

Business leaders, MPs, MPPs, and mayors agreed that securing trade and housing, and investing in health care and core infrastructure, will require closer cooperation across all levels of government.