

Fredericton Chamber of Commerce
Brief to Fredericton City Council
2016



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The Fredericton Chamber of Commerce thanks former mayor Brad Woodside and outgoing City Councillors Scott McConaghy, Marilyn Kerton, and Randy Dickinson for their service to our community and their collaborative relationship with the chamber. Similarly, we look forward to working with the current council and thank each of you for stepping forward to serve our community. We also appreciate the willingness of numerous staff members to share information, provide clarification and include our organization as a key stakeholder in decision-making processes. We would particularly like to thank Marcello Battilana, Darren Charters, Julia Ramirez and Laurie Guthrie for coming to speak to our committee in preparation of this brief.

Introduction

Above all, we submit that it is the responsibility of the mayor and council to take a leadership role in bringing together all three levels of government, particularly our local representatives, on issues of relevance to the Fredericton Region. This is particularly true of projects that involve bi- or tri-level funding or cooperation such as the Fredericton International Airport expansion, a new performing arts centre or increasing immigration numbers for our community.

In our 2015 annual membership survey, our members identified the following as “the most important issues facing Fredericton in the next two-five years:

- Population growth / Demographics (particularly immigration)
- The economy + jobs
- Access to primary health care
- Infrastructure
- Property tax

Pushing for federal and provincial funding for the expansion of the Fredericton International Airport must be a priority for the City and we encourage the mayor, councillors and city staff to make this a regular part of dialogue with our provincial and federal governments.

Our position of support for a new performing arts centre has been well-publicized and included in previous years’ briefs. The current Playhouse is a key economic driver for the downtown cultural core. Likewise, access to primary health care has been a priority for chamber members for many years and we were pleased that City government was able to work with the provincial government to find a permanent location for the downtown community health centre.

This 2016 brief focuses on three interrelated priorities for our members and our growing community: immigration, economic development, and transit.

Immigration

Growing our community through immigration has been a long-standing priority of the Fredericton Chamber of Commerce. Our Business Immigrant Mentorship Program and Hive Incubator have been leaders throughout the province - and indeed the country. These programs are now being offered throughout New Brunswick as well as in Alberta and British Columbia. We submit that this points to Fredericton being on the right track with our newcomer attraction and retention strategy, but also

underscores that jurisdictions from coast-to-coast are also ramping up their efforts to attract and retain newcomers as well.

The chamber is in the planning stages of securing funding for the launch of a succession matching program that will connect immigrant entrepreneurs with local owners seeking to sell their business. Business owners are often reticent to publicly announce their business is for sale for various legitimate reasons - making it difficult for newcomers to identify these opportunities. This program will help facilitate that process - improving retention rates for newcomers and saving businesses that may otherwise be in jeopardy of closing. The City of Fredericton has a vested interest in supporting both of these goals because of the benefits of an increased tax base, through population growth and business retention. In the near future we will make a formal request for a financial contribution from the City of Fredericton to make this initiative a reality and we are confident we can count on the support of our municipal government partners.

All three levels of government have important roles to play with the immigration file, but municipal governments - while without official policy levers - are particularly important for the integration and retention of newcomers.

Over the past decade, our chamber, city government and community at large have made great strides at making Fredericton a welcoming new home and place that immigrants may wish to choose to live on a permanent basis - but there remains more for all of us to do. Councillor Eric Megarity's work with newcomers and his efforts with various groups deserves special recognition. Having an identified (and passionate) immigration point person on council is a valuable resource for the community. Likewise, the funding of a Population Growth Specialist with Ignite Fredericton is providing great value - particularly as the lead individual with the City's federally-funded Local Immigration Partnership (hereinafter "LIP").

One area that we can all continuously improve on (and the LIP is helping) is determining what newcomers are looking for from their new community. It is one thing to feel welcomed, but quite another to feel connected. Visitors feel welcomed - residents feel connected.

Currently, the chamber's efforts remain primarily focused on business immigrants - which best leverages our expertise. But as a community, we need to do a better job at all other aspects of life and we are looking to the City of Fredericton to lead the charge. The recent influx of Syrian refugees has again shown us that we are great at welcoming - now let's work on connecting. The City's Local Immigration Partnership and "Newcomer Services Map" is a great start. Assisting newcomers to navigate day-to-day life in the city (complimentary to other such materials produced by MCAF, CIC and the like) will be critical to ensuring their long-term residency and success in the community. The City could host social gatherings and/or provide more family-oriented programming aimed at bringing current residents and newcomers together. When it comes to connecting to a new community, family is paramount - mac and cheese is more effective than wine and cheese.

Recommendations

- Provide support as requested and required for the chamber's planned succession matching program
- Take a leadership role in confronting negative dialogue regarding newcomers
- Encourage all City of Fredericton staff to complete cultural sensitivity training
- Provide support (human or financial resources) to the Fredericton Intercultural Centre, Multicultural Association of Fredericton and the New Brunswick Multicultural Council

Economic Development

Ignite Fredericton - After the turmoil faced with the demise of the Enterprise Network in New Brunswick, we believe that Fredericton's local economic development capabilities are stronger than ever before. We applaud the City for increasing and maintaining Ignite Fredericton's funding at a competitive level and encourage viewing any future funding requests from the investment perspective rather than merely a cost consideration. As the results of Ignite's 2015-16 report card indicate - the City of Fredericton and its residents are getting great value for their investment.

Supporting 57 new companies, employing 245 people since the last report card in 2014 while adding \$26.9 million in GDP per year to the region are laudable numbers. The nearly \$300,000 in additional property tax to Ignite stakeholders returns a significant portion of the investment directly to City coffers. However, the numbers are broken down, Ignite is returning the City's investment and improving the region's economic ecosystem. Current or planned strategic initiatives such as a product development living lab, export accelerator and startup task force balance high-value sector-specific initiatives such as the Natural Resources Task Force and support for microbreweries.

We also believe that the City of Fredericton has done a good job with working with their provincial and federal counterparts to avoid duplication and stretch funding dollars as far as possible. Ignite's co-location in Knowledge Park with Opportunities NB, Planet Hatch and the chamber's immigration support programs has seen practical and financial benefits. Creating the 'one-stop shop' that has been talked about for many years creates synergies and efficiencies that would otherwise be impossible.

Communications - In last year's brief we expressed concern about the City communicating with the business community - particularly in reference to 2014 road construction projects. 2015 was a much better year - particularly in reference to the extensive work completed on and around Main Street. In our 2015 annual membership survey, we asked our members if they were satisfied with the City's communication about road work. 53% said "yes"; 36% expressed no opinion; and only 11% said "no".

2016 will be another challenging year for road construction with extensive municipal/provincial work is set to be done on Regent and Prospect Streets. We appreciate the City (and Province) beginning this outreach in February and hope for the same level of engagement through 2016 and beyond.

Planning/Zoning - The City Centre Plan and Main Street Urban Design Plan are both ambitious, long-term visions of key economic zones that have the potential to transform their respective areas of the city and we support their implementation on a reasonable and cost-effective timeline. Implementing pieces of the plans in conjunction with otherwise-needed construction projects is a sensible use of resources.

Overall our members are satisfied with the work of the planning and zoning department. From time-to-time however, members believe that the City could be more flexible with some decisions. We appreciate that these decisions are a delicate balance of enabling growth while maintaining a long-term vision - but a strict adherence to formal guidelines does not always lead to the best decision.

Recommendations

- Continue to fund Ignite Fredericton at requested levels and provide other support
- Continue communications outreach regarding road work or other construction that impacts the normal flow of business

- Provide adequate signage to alert and redirect citizens to impacted businesses or business areas
- Be flexible in planning and zoning wherever possible to enable growth

Transit

In our 2015 brief we recommended that the City collect detailed data on public transit usage and load levels to enable evidenced-based decision-making. We commend the Transit Department for adopting technology provided by local startup ReadyPass. This system will not only provide the invaluable data needed to make politics-free decisions with our transit system, but also allow the system to become increasingly user-friendly and responsive to changing customer needs. Effective transit through evidence-based decision making was a popular topic of discussion during the 2016 election campaign and we are looking forward to the continued work in this area.

We recognize that it may not be feasible to service all corners of the city with a bus route - the City should focus on the best balance between geographical coverage and servicing routes that are high usage and/or feed into commercial areas. Population and economic growth require an effective public transit system (symbiotically, it can also produce some of this growth). In particular, our growing newcomer population relies on the public transportation system.

Recommendations

- Once enough data is collected, make evidenced-based decisions on how to best service the city's residents and businesses with the public transit system
- Explore opportunities to work with the provincial government on efficiencies in the public transit
- Expand the use of pilot projects to get real-world evidence of rider preferences

Summary

The City of Fredericton is well run by both elected officials and staff members. As stewards of the community, we are in good shape financially, culturally and economically - but there is always room for improvement. We look forward to continue working with municipal officials to move our community forward and provide a business perspective on issues. We thank everyone that stepped forward to run in the recent municipal election and look forward to working with this council for the next four years. Maintaining open lines of communication, making transparent decisions and thoughtfully receiving feedback from constituents and stakeholders will be critical to our community's continued success.