



**The Corporation of the  
City of Sault Ste. Marie**

**C O U N C I L   R E P O R T**

November 7, 2016

**TO:** Mayor Christian Provenzano and Members of City Council

**AUTHOR:** Victoria Prouse, Project Coordinator, Downtown Development Initiative

**DEPARTMENT:** Community Development and Enterprise Services

**RE:** The Mayor's Community Development Initiative

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**PURPOSE**

Over the past few months with Planning staff's support, the Mayor hosted sector-specific roundtable meetings concerning community development in Sault Ste. Marie. This report advises City Council on the key issues, themes, and opportunities emerging from these discussions.

**BACKGROUND**

In October 2015, the Mayor issued a transmittal to Council stating his intention to launch a community development planning initiative. The correspondence emphasized the important role community stakeholders play in harnessing existing assets to overcome the community's systemic barriers and achieve sustainable prosperity and resiliency.

Consequently, the Mayor and Planning hosted eight roundtable meetings with approximately 90 stakeholders from the following sectors:

- Health
- Education
- Social services
- Arts and culture
- Immigration
- Large employers
- Small to medium enterprises
- Downtown

In addition to these eight sessions with Planning staff support, the Mayor held informal sessions with members of the Mayor's Youth Advisory Council (MYAC) and the executive members of the Algoma Leadership Table. The Algoma

Leadership Table is comprised of representatives from many Sault and area social service agencies, such as Thrive Childhood Development Centre, the Algoma District School Board, Algoma Family Services and the District Social Services Administration Board.

Dialogue at the meetings was loosely structured on the following points:

- Shared challenges and opportunities of individual organizations and the entire sector
- Short and long-term goals
- Areas where the city could prove to be of assistance
- Potential avenues for collaboration with the City or across sectors

These meetings provided valuable perspectives and applied insight on the current socioeconomic issues facing organizations, sectors, and the entire community. Overall, stakeholders were very appreciative of being included in these discussions and expressed the desire to remain engaged on an ongoing basis.

## **ANALYSIS**

Following these meetings, Planning Staff consolidated minutes and extrapolated common themes across sector discussions. This exercise revealed significant overlap concerning stakeholder's perceptions of key issues facing the community as well as general consensus over effective approaches to overcome these challenges, increase prosperity and become more sustainable. The following section highlights key issues and opportunities that were recurring focus areas throughout these discussions and represent actionable initiatives for consideration by City Council and the Community Adjustment Committee.

### ***Key issues***

Though acknowledged by stakeholders in different contexts with unique ramifications for different organizations, the key issues identified below represent deep-rooted citywide challenges synonymous across sectors. These issues are complex and interconnected: their causes and effects are intertwined.

#### **1. Population and demographic trends**

Stakeholders identified Sault Ste. Marie's youth outmigration, aging population, and lack of diversity as barriers to sustainability.

Youth outmigration was raised as a significant challenge to achieving community prosperity. Postsecondary institutions shared struggles with stagnant enrollment despite aggressive recruitment campaigns and high rates of student satisfaction.

For major employers, this issue emerged as contributing to their struggle in finding suitable employees with desired skillsets within the city and difficulty in recruiting young people from outside Sault Ste. Marie.

Stakeholders are concerned about our community's aging population, which will continue to grow in disproportion to our overall population. The health and social services sector highlighted the increased burden of care required by this population cohort. For example, this will present significant challenges in having sufficient resources to deal with the influx of people requiring health care and affordable housing. Large employers are concerned about the impending recruitment gap due to high numbers of retirements and a lack of young people to fill these vacancies. For small retail businesses, succession planning is a significant challenge, as the traditional 'family business' model has been weakened with youth outmigration. A large proportion of small business proprietors, specifically in the downtown are approaching retirement age without the security of a successor.

Participants provided anecdotal evidence that our city is becoming more diverse, with an increasing mix of immigrants from around the world. However, newcomers identified the homogeneous nature of our existing population as a significant barrier to integrating into the community. Visible minorities and immigrants flagged racism and exclusionary attitudes as pervasive issues across the community. Stakeholders expressed the desire for community leadership to become more diverse to assist with promoting inclusion. Furthermore, newcomers from other parts of Canada expressed feeling excluded socially and from the workforce because they were labeled as 'outsiders'.

## **2. Economic diversity and business development**

Economic diversification was the most substantial priority identified by stakeholders. Consensus emerged over it being imperative that the city's prosperity no longer be intertwined with the status of Essar Steel and the steel market. Stakeholders recognized value in focusing on small business development in lieu of seeking investment from a major industry.

Indeed, small business owners highlighted difficulties in launching their enterprises and found some approval processes to be intimidating. However, many business owners were grateful for the assistance of the city's incubators and small business support provided by the EDC and Innovation Centre.

Economic diversification was identified as an opportunity to reverse the trend of an increasingly precarious workforce in Sault Ste. Marie. Stakeholders acknowledged that although there are many jobs available in the city, these positions are poorly paid, lacking benefits and long-term job security.

### 3. **Quality of life**

Many stakeholders brought up quality of life as a strong asset to our community: housing is relatively affordable, there are relatively low crime rates, there is close proximity to amenities, and we have access to beautiful natural spaces for outdoor recreation. However, observations and issues facing individuals and organizations challenge the assumption that all Sault Ste. Marie residents benefit from a high standard of living.

Major employers, arts and culture, education, and the immigration sector linked negative perceptions of the city's quality of life as a significant push factor for youth outmigration and a barrier to recruiting new residents. Stakeholders pointed to our city's lack of 'metropolitan' amenities (e.g., sidewalk patios, public art, investment in culture, festivals, a robust active transportation network) as contributing to a lack of civic pride and positivity about living in Sault Ste. Marie, especially among youth. Stakeholders emphasized the role a healthy and vibrant downtown plays as an economic driver for our city.

Though most stakeholders believed city residents enjoy a relatively high quality of life, the social services sector emphasized the growing social exclusion facing several neighbourhoods – especially Gore Street and James Street areas – and increasing poverty and income inequality in our community. Specifically, affordable, safe, and secure housing is scarce, causing individuals to settle for substandard conditions and rent from slum landlords. Furthermore, many people are dependent on public transit to access amenities and employment, which significantly restricts their mobility and ability to take advantage of the quality of life attributes other community members praise.

The social service and education sectors also flagged trends in social conditions that challenge traditional service models and challenge the notion that all Sault Ste. Marie residents benefit from a high quality of life. In the education sector, school boards report increasing incidences of children not achieving readiness for school. "School readiness" is a multidimensional concept with implications across sectors: it encompasses physical wellbeing, language development, cognition and general knowledge, and motor skills development. Furthermore, our community is facing significant increases in the number of individuals facing mental health challenges and a lack of resources for addressing these needs. Additionally, though crime rates have decreased across the community, law enforcement is now contending with increasing rates of domestic violence and transgressions related to mental illness.

#### *Summary of issues*

The community's deep-rooted complacency, linked with a failure to adopt innovative strategies for overcoming systemic issues was brought up in different ways at each of the eight roundtable meetings. Many stakeholders pointed to an 'insular' attitude incapable of establishing a new trajectory from the status quo as

the root cause of the above issues. Stakeholders emphasized that for our city to truly become resilient it will require a community-wide cultural shift.

### ***Key Opportunities***

Building on the key issues identified in the previous section, this section describes several actionable opportunities for the City to pursue. These opportunities mirror prevailing themes emerging from roundtable meetings as ways to overcome systemic issues and cultivate a cultural shift towards becoming a more sustainable, progressive, and inclusive community.

#### **1. Community Marketing**

Stakeholders agreed that Sault Ste. Marie residents lack community pride, and felt this was a root cause of population stagnation and youth outmigration. Stakeholders believed it was the responsibility of the City to actively promote the community in a positive light for residents. Indeed, a comprehensive marketing and public relations strategy was identified across sectors as an imperative step towards fostering a positive, unified community identity. Stakeholders contended the City requires a stronger unique vision to market both outside and inside the community, marketing unique advantages SSM has compared to other mid-size cities.

All sectors recognized the benefits this strategy would yield: a positive campaign can promote tourism, recruit skilled workers, advertise to immigrants, encourage youth to remain in the city, and foster community cohesion and pride.

#### **2. Economic independence**

As discussed in the above section, reliance on Essar Steel, the steel industry, and the global steel market presents a formidable barrier to achieving genuine long-term sustainability. Stakeholders were adamant that the City should focus economic development efforts on industries and enterprises independent from the steel industry. Stakeholders cautioned the logic that procuring one large employer will serve as a cure-all for our city's problems. Specifically, stakeholders identified the value in supporting small business development. Stakeholders suggested the city should continue to invest in small business support through combining and expanding the EDC and SSMIC incubators and provide guidance and training for new business owners (e.g., creating a business development 'roadmap'). It was also recommended that the City look to other communities such as Windsor and Hamilton that are actively working to transition from a single-industry economy.

#### **3. Investing in Quality of Life**

Stakeholders emphasized the importance of City Council recognizing the value of making decisions and allocating resources to infrastructure and initiatives that ultimately lead to positive quality of life outcomes, specifically in terms of urban

development, community amenities and promoting arts and culture, and increasing mobility.

One stakeholder effectively summarized this opportunity by observing, "Overall, there are not enough compelling reasons to come to this community. We don't stand out enough and lack a unique selling proposition. There are lot of things we could do to make Sault Ste. Marie cleaner, cooler, and more beautiful."

It was identified that the City must change their attitude towards urban development and infrastructure to encompass a more holistic focus on achieving outcomes that enhance the quality of life for all residents. Stakeholders' description of the issues and opinions on moving forward encompass what urban planners identify as "Placemaking": a multifaceted approach to enhancing people's connection to a space. Placemaking has also been identified as a tool for economic development. Stakeholders recognized the cultural and economic value of projects such as Queenstown Commons and the Huron Street Welcome Feature as well as festivals, events, and arts and culture and the role that these initiatives play in building a beautiful and exciting city. Stakeholders flagged the attitude of withholding funding for 'nonessential' public realm enhancement projects as counterintuitive on the basis that these projects should proceed for their ability to retain and attract youth and enhance people's connection to particular neighbourhoods and the city overall. Stakeholders expressed overwhelming support for downtown revitalization initiatives and were in favour of proposed projects, policies, and operational adjustments recommended in the draft downtown strategy.

Though it is easy to get around the city by car, addressing the barriers to mobility non-drivers face was widely recognized as a priority. In particular, stakeholders identified value in committing to continually improving the city's active transportation network and retrofitting existing roads with enhanced sidewalks and cycling facilities without waiting for the road to be reconstructed. Criticism emerged over recent cuts to the public transit schedule and the difficulty with existing routes in travelling to different areas around the city and there was widespread recognition that large investments must be made in order for our transit network to increase ridership and for residents to perceive it as a viable alternative to travelling by car. Stakeholders pointed to the success of the John Rowswell Hub Trail as evidence of how active transportation can yield wide-reaching benefits for the community: the trail is now advertised in tourism documents, marketed in real estate advertisements, and is a significant source of community pride.

#### **4. Service delivery at City Hall**

The role of City Hall, specifically city staff and how the Corporation can best advance community development goals forward was frequently discussed.

Bureaucratic challenges and intimidating processes were identified as inhibiting programming, activities, and business development.

Many opportunities for more efficient and responsive service and communication were identified throughout the process. Specifically, the concept of a liaison officer emerged as a mechanism to ensure organizations' needs are being met and they are being referred to the right person to obtain their service as quickly as possible. Stakeholders felt that the City should take a more active role in encouraging groups to host events in the downtown.

Some stakeholders expressed frustration with contacting City Hall and being passed around to several different people before they were finally directed to the appropriate person. This issue could be mitigated by providing basic staff training to familiarize staff members with the official roles and responsibilities of all staff within the organization.

Stakeholders believed City Hall should take a leadership role in identifying and promoting community outcomes and providing more guidance for particular sectors. For example, the arts and culture sector believed that a citywide culture strategy would help to increase prominence of arts and culture and increase cultural literacy across the community. The social services sector similarly identified the prospective benefits of developing a child and youth strategy: these policies would identify concrete goals for the city to work towards and promote.

Several "quick wins" for the City to move forward with were also identified throughout the meetings, including increasing enforcement of property standards, signage, and traffic regulations (i.e., no cycling on sidewalks, especially in the downtown); relaxing paid parking enforcement downtown (i.e., offering a ten-minute 'grace period' for expired tickets like they do in other cities); and increasing signage for cyclists and throughout the downtown.

## **5. Cross-sector partnerships**

All sectors recognized the value in partnership building across sectors to achieve mutual gains. A lack of conversation across sectors towards similar objectives was identified as a pervasive barrier. The Algoma Leadership Table (a consortium of social service providers) provides a strong example of the synergistic power of partnership models. Stakeholders suggested the City of Sault Ste. Marie could act as a partnership facilitator to bring organizations together and engage in dialogue. Many stakeholders emphasized the significant potential of the City playing a more formal role in facilitating partnerships between community organizations and postsecondary institutions. For example, formalizing a relationship between local employers and postsecondary institutions was identified as a worthwhile way to simultaneously address the community's impending skills gap and youth outmigration due to lack of employment.

## **6. Inclusivity, equity, and social support**

Stakeholders stressed the significance of the City becoming more inclusive and supporting the needs of residents, and the critical role the Corporation and the Social Services Board plays in achieving these goals. Neighbourhood-based poverty is increasing, and is of particular concern for children growing up in these areas. Investing in the James Street neighbourhood (similar to what has proceeded on Gore Street with streetscape enhancements and increased social support through the Neighbourhood Resource Centre) was suggested as a method to improve the livelihoods of individuals residing in that area and to reconnect the neighbourhood to the rest of the downtown.

Stakeholders also identified a lack of affordable housing in the community. Affordable housing has a transformative effect on individuals' livelihoods: without safe, stable, and sound housing it is difficult to obtain meaningful employment and maintain physical wellbeing. Stakeholders would like to see increased investment in affordable housing as well as larger incentives for local developers to incorporate affordable units in their developments.

Stakeholders described multiple benefits of making investments that would position the City as a leader in geriatric care. This idea has multiple benefits. First, our growing seniors' population would ensure adequate resources and excellence in care to meet their specific needs. Second, the city could become a destination for individuals requiring specialized care and thus attract medical specialists and potential research opportunities.

The conversations around social inclusion and newcomers mandate that something must be done to discourage racism and encourage inclusion both on a personal level and in the workforce. Stakeholders believed it was the City's role to reduce racism. Some suggested a public education campaign to encourage understanding of different cultures. A few stakeholders suggested the City appoint diverse community members to their boards and committees to demonstrate to both newcomers and existing residents that visible minorities can take leadership roles in our community.

## **CONCLUSION**

The Mayor's Community Development Initiative exposed many valuable ideas which stem from stakeholders' valuable experiences working in our community. The individuals that volunteered their time to take part in this process should be commended for their participation.

## **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

Not applicable.

## **STRATEGIC PLAN / POLICY IMPACT**

The issues and opportunities emerging from this exercise align with the vision and directives of the Corporate Strategic Plan.



**RECOMMENDATION**

It is therefore recommended that Council take the following action:

Resolved that the report of the Project Coordinator, Downtown Development Initiative, dated 2016 11 07 be received as information and that Council forward this report to the Community Adjustment Committee for its consideration.

Respectfully submitted,



Victoria Prouse, MPI  
Project Coordinator  
Downtown Development Initiative  
705.759.5373  
[v.prouse@cityssm.on.ca](mailto:v.prouse@cityssm.on.ca)

VP/ps