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Mayor



Corporation of the City of  
Sault Ste. Marie

November 7, 2016

**TO: Members of City Council  
Community Adjustment Committee**

**AUTHOR: Christian Provenzano, Mayor**

**RE: Community Development Initiative**

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## Overview

This report is supplemental to the report of the Planning Department and adopts and relies upon the information outlined therein. In that respect, I want to note the very good and hard work by a number of our city hall employees who assisted with the community consultation: Don McConnell, Steve Turco, Peter Tonazzo, Victoria Prouse from our Planning Department and Mike Ward and Lisa Bell of my office. Their effort was one of two key reasons that our consultation process was a success. The second key reason was the community itself.

We opened the doors to City Hall and asked the community to come in. To a person, to an organization, to an agency, it answered the call. We held 10 consultation sessions that involved close to 90 participants from our community. Dealing with the challenges a community faces, finding its opportunities and moving it forward requires community consensus and collective effort. I am confident, as the Mayor of the community, that we have both.

The intent of the consultative process that I initiated was to hear from people involved in a variety of local sectors, to identify common challenges, opportunities, themes and avenues of collaboration, and to look for tangible actions that the City of Sault Ste. Marie could take to precipitate economic and community development.

No matter the sector or group of people we were meeting with, common themes and comments emerged time and again. Just as important, it was evident to us that large parts of our community want to be an active part of a larger effort to meet our challenges and develop our opportunities.

For my part, it is evident that our community cannot continue with the status quo. If it does, if it continues to assume that it can rely primarily on the steel industry our economy will not develop beyond what it is today. We can hope that our

local steel mill has a long and productive life but we cannot continue to take that presumption for granted or plan based upon it.

Sault Ste. Marie has an aged demographic and its death rate is outpacing its birth rate. Our community needs people to move to Sault Ste. Marie and while I appreciate that people need opportunity, people also create opportunity. What people also need is to feel welcomed, respected and connected. Our community has to focus on and embrace migration, immigration and diversity. Like the arch outside city hall declares, we need to be the 'friendly city'.

We also need our youth to want to stay or to want to return after they have had the experience and opportunity of living elsewhere. That requires, in my estimation, a renewed civic pride and a focus on quality of life initiatives. We have to be positive about our community, focus on its great attributes and the quality of life that we can offer.

In many ways, our community is not alone in its challenges. Many communities are faced with the same issues to varying degrees. I have a great deal of confidence in our City staff, our community leadership and the people I have met and listened to throughout this process. I know we as a community can meet our challenges and be a role model for other communities trying to do the same.

With this supplemental report, I wanted to draw Council's attention to some specific matters referred to in the report from planning and offer some additional opinions and suggestions in order to encourage discussion amongst Council. To be clear, the following is an expression of my thoughts and opinion based on the consultation and should not be taken as supported or endorsed by staff.

## **Economic Development**

### ***a. Reorganize/Refocus our Efforts***

As a primary matter, the City has to begin taking a leadership role in Economic Development. I think it is fair to say that taxpayers naturally look to us to support the development of our economy. I think it is also fair to say, generally, that the City has historically outsourced that responsibility to the Sault Ste. Marie Economic Development Corporation (SSMEDC) and the Sault Ste. Marie Innovation Centre (SSMIC). In addition to these two independent bodies, City Council has access to the Economic Development Fund which is distributed at its discretion but generally on the recommendation of the SSMEDC.

The City has begun the process of taking more direct responsibility for its economic development efforts through its corporate reorganization and the creation of the Deputy CAO Community Development and Enterprise. I believe this is a very positive development. The City has also undertaken an examination of its economic development efforts. My understanding is that Council will have a report before us by the end of the year and I am confident

that we will consider it thoroughly and make productive decisions based upon it. In the meantime, and subject to the recommendations we will receive, I believe that we need to expand the scope of the Economic Development Fund and increase the funds available through it.

The development of our economy is not simply a matter of retaining businesses or attracting new ones. The development of economy correlates to the development of community—a productive and healthy economy requires and starts with a productive and healthy workforce. Despite our higher than average unemployment rate, there are good jobs in this community that are going unfilled. Some of those jobs could serve to attract people to our community (or back to our community) and some of the jobs can serve as opportunities for people who are unemployed, underemployed or on social assistance.

I believe we need to expand the Economic Development Fund into the **Economic and Community Development Fund** and increase the fund in order that we may also encourage and participate in community development projects in addition to economic development projects. The fund should have new terms of reference and be administered by City Council upon the recommendation of the Deputy CAO Community Development & Enterprise and the Chief Administrative Officer. I note, importantly, that I do not believe the additional monies should come from increasing the tax levy. I believe the resources should come from the current funding envelope and I have asked MDB Insights (the consultant commissioned to review our economic development efforts) to assess this suggestion in order that it may provide advice to Council in its report.

***b. Cluster Development Opportunities***

Additionally, through the consultations it was evident that there is some social and economic opportunity in two specific sectors: Health Care & Education. A number of opportunities within and amongst the sectors were discussed and I believe those discussions need to continue. For instance, in the health care sector, it was noted that both Sudbury and Thunder Bay have centres of excellence in different health care fields but Sault Ste. Marie does not. Although some minor challenges were acknowledged there was no significant reason that Sault Ste. Marie cannot and should not develop a centre of excellence.

I would suggest that a 'Health Care' cluster and an 'Education' cluster (similar to the lottery and gaming task force) could be created through the DCAO Community Development and Enterprise. There are community leaders from both sectors who expressed a willingness to continue to work with the City and each other to find develop opportunities. The City can support and facilitate the development of sector specific projects and should make those efforts.

## **Community Pride & Identity**

One of the most frequent things that we heard is that we need a much better collective sense of not only who we are as a community but who we want to be. To put it simply, the overwhelming consensus was that we lacked a community brand. People generally recognized ‘Naturally Gifted’ as a City slogan but struggled to understand what it meant or how it communicates our community’s value proposition: why people should want to live, work and play here – the value in and of our community that makes it attractive.

The development of a brand that specifically communicates the community’s value proposition was generally noted as important to:

1. Community Pride; and,
2. Population Retention & Growth; and,
3. Attracting Business & Tourism.

One participant made a particularly effective point that underlines the issue. Our community and area offer some of the best cross country skiing, downhill skiing, hiking, boating (including canoeing and kayaking), camping, fishing and mountain biking in the province and as also compared to upper Michigan. Notwithstanding, we do not celebrate or sell these really attractive attributes.

Another important suggestion was that the brand should belong to the City but the City has to ensure, when developing it, that it is a brand that will be used by our community partners when promoting and selling the community. Specifically, the City has to develop a brand that the College and the University support and will use as they promote their own institution through the community and to the world at large.

As an accompanying effort to developing a community brand, the City (in conjunction with its partners) may wish to consider developing a purpose-built website to target and attract new residents and workers to the community. This would obviously align with efforts to newcomers to settle here and to drive growth.

There are some existing sites launched by other Canadian communities that could be looked to for guidance. In particular, the “Move Up Prince George” website (<http://moveupprincegeorge.ca/>) provides an interesting example of how another northern, mid-sized city is marketing itself. The site was developed after the community undertook a labour market needs assessment to determine its future workforce needs. The website was launched in combination with a marketing campaign in several major cities (Edmonton, Vancouver, Toronto and London, ON), one that targeted prospective residents who were likely to be receptive to moving to Prince George.

The site provides information about job opportunities and the mechanics of moving to Prince George, but it also does a great job communicating the stories of people who have chosen to move or who already reside in the community and what they like about it.

Both of these projects will require resources and I recognize that we have some very difficult budgeting decisions ahead of us. Notwithstanding, we have to be willing to make investments that are in our community's best interest and I suggest that these two investments would meet that threshold.

### **Creating an Inclusive and Welcoming Community**

I want to start by recognizing that we have a number of organizations doing good work making Sault Ste. Marie a more inclusive and welcoming community including: the Local Immigration Partnership, New to the Sault, Sault Career Centre, Sault College, Algoma University and Refugee 705. I note, additionally, that Councillor Romano has led a group that has studied and considered the issue of immigration to our community and I look forward to his report to Council.

Sault Ste. Marie has come a long way in becoming a more welcoming community but we still have a lot of work to do. For our community to grow and thrive, our community needs migrants and immigrants to locate or relocate to Sault Ste. Marie. People want to live in a community where they feel welcome, accepted and included. City Council and administration has to support and supplement the good work already occurring and there are a few things we can do in the near term.

#### ***a. Boards and Committees***

One of the comments that I found very incisive came from a participant at the immigration and diversity round table. The individual commented that minorities need to see themselves in the City's leadership, specifically on the boards and committees that govern our community agencies. The City has to make a more significant effort to ensure that diverse perspectives are given the opportunity to be heard and to be a part of the decision making process. City Council will shortly be assessing the Boards & Committee appointment process and we should be mindful of this advice when ultimately deciding a way forward.

#### ***b. First Nations and Metis***

It is especially important that we continue to build our relationship with local First Nations and Metis residents and neighbours. Sault Ste. Marie is bordered by two First Nations communities and approximately ten per cent of the City's population identifies as First Nations or Metis, making for one of the largest urban First Nations populations in the province.

Both City staff and members of Council have been making strides in recent years in terms of building positive relationships with the First Nations and Metis communities. In 2015, the Mayor's Office hosted Cultural Competency Training for City staff, councillors and community members. Another informational session on First Nations for members of Sault Ste. Marie City Council is being planned with Batchewana First Nation. While progress is happening, there is certainly more work to be done and our community as a whole has to be willing to continue moving forward in the spirit of reconciliation.

### ***c. Transit***

Part of being inclusive requires the presence of a well-functioning and convenient transit system. Sault Transit is relied on as a primary mode of transportation by a variety of groups, some of them at risk of being marginalized. These include: low-income persons, seniors, persons with medical conditions who are unable to drive, youth, and post-secondary students.

To be clear, there is no suggestion that the staff and management at Sault Transit are anything but professional. However, there was frustration expressed about the frequency, timing, availability of transfers and other systematic transit issues. We heard that it could be time-consuming and onerous for many transit users to travel to appointments or locations in different parts of town. As an example, we were advised that it took a single mother almost 2 hours to travel to the Social Services building for a scheduled appointment.

As with many of the issues canvassed in this report, there are no easy or inexpensive solutions available that would quickly bolster our transit services. However, addressing the issue first requires a better understanding of how the system could be improved and what that would entail. To that end, the route optimization review scheduled for 2017 is an important first step in assessing what could be changed.

### ***d. Supporting Arts and Culture***

Arts and culture are important contributors to the community's quality of life. If we want tourists to visit, if we want youth to stay, if we want former residents to move back, and if we want newcomers to decide to live here, then we need to offer a compelling mix of things to do and places in which to do them. A compelling arts and culture scene is a vital part of the equation.

Part of the effort to enhance arts and culture could involve the development of a city-wide culture strategy, one that would increase the prominence of arts and culture and build understanding about the sector.

Certainly, times have been tough, but we cannot look at our arts and culture investment as discretionary or an extra. If anything, we need to re-examine our

spending to see if there are ways to make needed new investments and reinvestments into the sector. The coming transition with the Sault Ste. Marie Public Library may offer one opportunity in which to reallocate funds across the sector—both for the benefit of the library and other cultural institutions supported by the City.

### **Our Downtown**

The downtown was a topic of its own consultation, but also a topic that came up from session to session. The downtown related to the development of the economy, to attracting and retaining youth and young professionals, to addressing socio-economic challenges and to creating a community that people wanted to live in. Suffice it to say, focusing on improving our downtown was a very frequently identified priority.

Over the last several years, the Planning Department has been administering a Downtown Improvement Plan which has facilitated the inflow of over \$80 million in private sector investment.

Recent downtown improvements include the refurbishment of Gore Street that will soon be completed. There has also been considerable development in the Canal District neighborhood, with new developments including the pump track, the Etienne Brule site, new investments by Parks Canada at the Sault Canal site, and private sector activity at Mill Market, Mill Square and The Yard.

The next phase in the downtown redevelopment plan is currently being finalized by the Planning Department. Though this is a difficult budget year, it is critical that the City conduct all necessary preparations in 2017 in order to prepare for implementation in 2018.

Out of respect for Planning and their forthcoming plan, I will refrain from offering too many specifics about what I would like to see occur downtown. However, I will offer one general idea for consideration that I feel is important.

To my mind, one of the challenges for improving the downtown is that most plans anticipate taking a protracted approach, with public investments and improvements being made gradually over many years. This tends to yield incremental progress that can be difficult to see, in part because of our downtown's spread-out physical form. A block-by-block approach runs the risk that by the time the last block is renewed that the earliest ones will be looking tired again.

Our downtown revitalization efforts would be boosted if they could be seen and felt quickly on a dramatic, extensive scale. For example, devoting a full capital works budget for one year to downtown improvements would allow for visual, meaningful progress to occur in a short period of time. Completing significant improvements quickly would be a way to generate momentum for the downtown

and increase positivity, which in turn would hopefully lead to renewed private sector investment and community interest in this essential area of the City.

## **Conclusion**

These recommendations are not exhaustive. While the challenges we heard about and discussed are easy enough to recognize and understand, finding solutions to adequately address them is more complex. While the opportunities we heard about and discussed are very conceivably achievable, realizing them requires that we build capacity and community good will.

There is a lot of work to do as a community which will depend on continuing to bring people and community groups together to work collaboratively. To this end, the City can be a change agent. It can lead, it can facilitate and it can encourage community and economic development but to create broad based community change, we need the cooperation of our community partners including (but not limited to): the College and University, the School Boards, the PUC, Sault Area Hospital, the OLG, our private sector and our First Nation neighbours. We have to continue to engage our partners, to assist them in their efforts and to make clear how we need their assistance in our broader community efforts.

We are fortunate that in the near-term we have the Community Adjustment Program in place to assist with developing this broader effort. Planning's report, my report and other relevant information from our sessions will be provide to the Community Adjustment Committee to assist them in their efforts. I am hopeful they will find our work helpful and I look forward to the receiving the Committee's report in spring of 2017.

I do want to acknowledge that there have been past community development efforts such as Destiny Sault Ste. Marie and Building an Extraordinary Community. These initiatives had their successes and they also benefitted from the extensive and sincere efforts of many participants—including past Mayors and members of Council. However, we are at a juncture where we need to apply ourselves with even greater urgency to the difficult task of reorienting our community's trajectory. To put things simply, I believe we need to shift the focus from maintaining the City we have to building the City that we want.

Much of the change that our community requires depends upon the leadership of City Council. It is to this Council's credit that we have shown ourselves able to contemplate difficult issues, arrive at difficult decisions and maintain a spirit of collegiality throughout. We will need to continue being assertive and cooperative to move our City forward. I suggest to you that some of the groundwork for doing so is already in place and with this report you have my recommendations for next steps.



I look for and welcome your ideas and your feedback. I am certain that with your input and support, the guidance we receive from the Community Adjustment Committee, and with buy-in from our community partners, that we will be able to establish ambitious goals for our City and put the necessary structures in place to realize them.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Christian Provenzano". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large loop at the end.

Christian Provenzano