



Growth needed as city sits at crossroads

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OUR city is unique in many ways, as it was created through the amalgamation of two towns and the rural areas of Neebing and McIntyre therefore creating a geographical dispersion and a footprint the size of the city of Montreal without the economies of scale.

The subsequent urban sprawl also created many challenges in terms of providing services at a reasonable cost. City ownership of TBaytel provides a much needed financial help and the ability to invest in regional connectivity as a way to stimulate economic development. In fact, it has been said before many times that what is good for the region is good for Thunder Bay.

The recent 2016 Statistics Canada census numbers clearly indicate that our city and region are experiencing little growth and a stable population.

The more concerning fallout of Census 2016 are the studies done by the North Superior Workforce Planning Board and the Northern Policy Institute which indicate that besides a drop of around 4,000 people in the Thunder Bay District being projected over the next 25 years, the ratio of working to retired people will substantially change, greatly impacting our quality of life.

While we may have five to 10 years before we feel the full impact of these trends, the time to act is now or demographics alone will dictate our future.

The aging of our population and workforce are not new issues to our city. Through the Age Friendly Designation and other initiatives, the City has been proactive in its preparation.

In terms of infilling efforts, the City has been providing incentive programs for the Business Improvement Areas (BIA) for at least 20 years. These are valuable tools in any growth programs and many businesses and individuals have taken advantage of them.

A new plan was approved by council in August of 2016 and \$100,000 has been budgeted to support the downtown cores and intensification programs.

Our tourism department has launched new initiatives through their strategic digital media approach and videos to highlight our superb quality of life and natural settings and the Thunder Bay Economic Development Commission has

recently launched their new website, www.gotothunderbay.ca, aimed at attracting people who want to live, invest, look for a job, or just visit our city.

On the financial side, the current multi-year budget approach and a more focused effort at controlling cost escalation is starting to produce results with more than \$2.8 million in permanent savings found in the 2017 budget by our administration under the direction of city council.

A renewed emphasis on continuous improvement and efficiencies should help in controlling costs but it is not enough. We need to grow our economy, create jobs, and attract more people — especially young families. After all we have some of the most affordable homes in the country.

Within the context for growth identified above and the historical reality of how Thunder Bay became a city with a preference for suburban living, a perception seems to have been created that all new development is occurring outside of the urban areas; but recent studies indicate that more than 50 per cent of new development is coming from new homes and apartments (infilling) in urban areas.

As well, market demand for subdivisions in the suburban areas of the city that meet the official plan requirements would still add to the mix of what makes a livable city and provide additional opportunities for growth. The city is currently undertaking studies to better understand the life cycle costs of these developments and their long-term sustainability.

Another key point to remember is that most of the infrastructure for growth in our city is already in place. Thunder Bay large service providers like TBaytel, Thunder Bay Hydro, water, roads, garbage pickup and snowplowing could easily handle another 20,000 to 30,000 people before there was a need to add to the infrastructure already being provided.

In other words, the key issue is the incremental revenue of any new development versus the incremental costs of providing those new services. If the fixed cost remains and we would still have to pay for it, properly planned growth would increase our net revenue and reduce the cost of taxation for each individual taxpayer (economies of scale).

Also needed are new innovative approaches to growing our economy and increasing our population through enhanced collaboration between the City and all orders of government, economic development agencies, education institutions, unions, chambers of commerce, workforce planning boards and others. These partners have already contributed tremendously over the last 20-plus years to the economic diversification of our city that allowed us to withstand the loss of more than 7,000 direct and indirect jobs when our forestry industry collapsed during the 2008 recession.

We have done it before and we can do it again as now we have an even stronger foundation for growth through substantial investments already made in our infrastructure.

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