
Subject: COVID-19 Economic Recovery Forum Summary

Report to: Members of Regional Council

Report date: Thursday, July 22, 2021

Recommendations

1. That this report **BE RECEIVED** for information.

Key Facts

- On Thursday, July 15, the Regional Chair, in partnership with the 12 mayors, hosted a moderated forum with representatives from Niagara's business associations to exchange information, ideas and priorities
- The discussion was attended by 14 representatives from 12 distinct business associations, representing a broad range of sectors as well as having membership in all 12 municipalities
- The discussion focused primarily on Regional post-pandemic economic recovery strategies
- The concerns discussed by the participants included consistent messaging and policy interpretation, irrigation, affordable housing, labour market planning, climate change, data sharing and diversity and inclusivity
- Upon completion of the forum, there was agreement among all participants that this type of informal communication should continue and be more regular

Financial Considerations

There are no direct financial implications associated with the approval of this report.

Analysis

On July 15, the Regional Chair and the 12 local area municipal mayors joined with representatives from Niagara's local business community to share an update on the current state of Niagara's municipal finances, as well as have an open discussion where participants could share their ideas, key learnings and suggestions with the heads of municipal council.

The following business representatives participated:

1. Michael Miryneck, Niagara Construction Association
2. Denise Potter, West Lincoln Chamber of Commerce
3. Paul Robertson, West Lincoln Chamber of Commerce
4. Matthias Koster, Tourism Niagara*
5. Malcolm Woodhouse, Niagara Board of Trade and Commerce

6. Chuck McShane, Niagara Home Builders Association
7. Lindsey Hendriks, Lincoln Chamber of Commerce
8. Rebecca Shelley, Grimsby and District Chamber of Commerce
9. Eduardo Lafforgue, Niagara-on-the-Lake Chamber of Commerce
10. Mishka Balsom, Greater Niagara Chamber of Commerce
11. Verne Milot, South Niagara Chambers of Commerce
12. Don Cyr, Niagara Industrial Association
13. Cathy Mous, Niagara Federation of Agriculture
14. Debbie Zimmerman, Grape Growers of Ontario

It is important to note that Anthony Annunziata, President of Tourism Niagara, was unavailable to participate on the forum. Given the impacts of COVID-19 on tourism in Niagara, Chair Bradley had a follow up discussion with Mr. Annunziata to ensure the views of the tourism industry would be part of the conversation.

The 12 Mayors and Regional Chair made the strategic decision to invite representatives from established business and industry associations to share their ideas and suggestions. Participants from these organizations are in a unique position as they have close relationships with their members and can therefore share holistic and well-rounded views of entire sectors or geographic areas rather than the views of one specific business.

As part of the forum, Commissioner of Corporate Services, Todd Harrison, provided an overview of the last 24 months. Highlights of Commissioner Harrison's presentation included points from the KPMG sustainability study, the pressures created by the pandemic on municipal operations as well as significant financial commitments for the future: GO train stations, hospital and hospice funding and the South Niagara Wastewater Treatment plant.

The Regional Chair shared with participants that 92% of the Region's budget is directed towards services that a recent KPMG study deemed to be essential or mandatory. The Chair also stated that municipalities in Ontario may not run deficits and advised participants that the policy mechanisms available to provide direct financial support or relief to businesses are exceptionally limited at the municipal level.

After providing this context, the forum shifted to an open discussion with all participants regarding key pandemic learnings and ideas to expedite Niagara's economic recovery. It is important to note that while the discussion was framed as a post-COVID-19 recovery conversation, many of the topics discussed by the participants did not have a direct connection to pandemic recovery, nor were they the direct responsibility of municipal government. All participants were given an opportunity to share their views with the heads of council.

Summary of Discussion Topics

The following topics were raised by the participants:

- 1. COVID-19 impacts and support** – participants agreed that not all sectors of the economy were impacted by the pandemic equally, acknowledging that sectors such as manufacturing remained mostly untouched by the regulations associated with COVID-19. Regarding support for businesses, the programs that were most frequently accessed were appropriately offered by the federal and provincial government (wage subsidy, rent subsidy, other grant programs, etc.); there was an appreciation of the times government was able to modify policy to be supportive (such as the ability for restaurants to sell alcohol via take out, and the expansion of patio licenses). There was a call to speed up approvals and reduce red tape where appropriate. Participants also highlighted the importance of the Canada-US border being open, although they recognized that this is not a municipal responsibility. Reference was made to an increased use of rapid testing to help expedite this opening.
- 2. COVID-19 message clarity and policy interpretation** – participants suggested the lack of clarity from the province in regard to COVID-19 rules and regulations, as well as local policy interpretation, caused a high degree of confusion across the region as well as between different sectors of the economy. Participants asked that should another lock down be required that the province provide more clarity regarding specific rules. Participants also noted the problematic nature of “mixed messaging” throughout the pandemic where we would invite tourists to visit, and then ask them to stay away; it was noted that all barriers to tourism should be considered being lifted, including making beaches only available for residents and the high-cost of parking tickets.
- 3. Irrigation** – participants raised the importance of sustainable and affordable irrigation to Niagara’s agriculture sector. Specific ideas discussed included the need for provincial classification of irrigation as infrastructure, the need for the Region’s Official Plan to recognize agriculture as a significant economic driver, and the need for all partners and stakeholders to be active participants in finding an acceptable solution. Forum participants were made aware that Regional Council has already taken some steps to address this issue.
- 4. Housing affordability** – participants agreed that housing affordability is an issue in Niagara. While there was no consensus regarding a solution, suggestions from participants included the expansion of housing stock, reducing the administrative “red tape” in regards to planning approvals, considerations for development charges, inclusionary zoning and incentives for developers to include affordable units.

5. **Labour market** – forum participants agreed that there are issues in finding qualified individuals for the jobs that are available in the region. Specifically, participants suggested there is a lack of youth going into trades and manufacturing, causing pressure points for those two industries. Suggestions to alleviate these issues included an increase in immigration, an expansion of co-op and job training programs, as well as marketing campaigns designed to increase interest in trades as a career option. Participants also mentioned that certain labour shortages could be addressed through an increased focus on diversity, equity and inclusionary policies and practices.
6. **Climate change** – those participating in the forum spoke about the issue of climate change on Niagara's economy, specifically around adaptation and mitigation. Interestingly, participants discussed the connection between climate change and issues such as heating and cooling costs, increased construction costs due to the cost of construction materials as well as the pandemic's effects on retail purchasing habits.
7. **Data sharing** – there was a call for a more centralized point to easily access data across the region. Participants suggested that specific data is "split" between levels of government or different parties and gaining access to fulsome and complete data for decision making is often difficult. Specifically, participants asked for "politically independent, but publicly available" data to ensure the best possible decisions can be made. All participants agreed with the general sentiment that all sectors (as represented by the forum participants) would benefit from a greater level of collaboration and coordination, independent of any government involvement.
8. **Transportation systems** – participants noted the importance of regional transit to Niagara, pointing the need for schedules to be more closely tied to shift changes to meet demands at "surge times." Participants also noted the need to ensure those travelling to Niagara via GO train have access to transportation. While the WEGO service was noted to be a good model that provides connectivity aligned with the GO schedule, participants felt that this level of connectivity should be offered across the region. Participants also mentioned the importance of ease of access to airports, both here in Niagara and in Hamilton.

Next Steps

Due to the extensive and broad list of topics discussed during the forum, the following next steps are being undertaken:

1. Commitment to continuing conversations with this group of participants, including updates between forums when appropriate

2. Meet with the Niagara Workforce Planning Board, the school boards and post-secondary institutions to better understand the current labour market in Niagara
3. Advocate to senior levels of government regarding COVID-19 messaging clarity
4. Explore options for meaningful next steps regarding climate change adaptation and mitigation, as well as a review of municipal “red tape” and approval processes
5. Request a briefing from the Region’s economic development team regarding economic data sharing
6. Continue to action council’s directions regarding irrigation issues in Niagara
7. A follow-up survey has been sent to forum participants to collect their feedback on the session and determine ways to strengthen future forums

Relationship to Council Strategic Priorities

Given the broad list of topics discussed during the forum, there is a strong relationship between this report and all of council’s strategic priorities of supporting businesses and economic growth, healthy vibrant community, responsible growth and infrastructure planning and sustainable and engaging government.

Other Pertinent Reports

There are no other reports directly related to this matter.

Submitted by:
Jim Bradley, Chair
Niagara Region

This report was prepared in consultation with Daryl Barnhart, Executive Officer to the Regional Chair.