

Consultant views Sault Ste. Marie's future as 'bright'

A population consultant says Sault Ste. Marie's future is bright but it's up to the community partners to capitalize on the opportunities that exist to grow the city.



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Sault Ste. Marie's future is stronger than it has been in some time, says a consultant who specialized on population and employment projections.

Tom McCormack, president of Metro Economics, was hired to complete a population and employment study on Sault Ste. Marie to help the study with statistics needed to develop a new Official Plan for the city.

The report concludes that by 2036 Sault Ste. Marie's population will increase by 9,900 people, requiring an additional 4,000 housing units.

"Your future, in my opinion, is strong and stronger than it has been in some time. That may be difficult for some people to accept, but it is," he told city council.

Mayor Christian Provenzano admitted to city council that at first blush he questioned the figures in the report but now understands that the retirement of the baby boomers and changing economy will require an influx of people to the city in the coming years and the results are "incredibly sensible."

Provenzano agrees the city needs to create the right environment for the change to happen.

"One of the challenges we have is that we haven't been successful in conveying the message that Sault Ste. Marie is a great community to live in. I have a tremendous amount of faith that if we do convey that message . . . we will grow to this number," Provenzano said.

McCormick said the statistics may be difficult to grasp but in fact, they are conservative in nature.

"This may be hard to accept, but the statistics show it," he told city council Monday in his presentation to council.

McCormack said it is important to note that the data shows the erosion of the economy base "is behind Sault Ste. Marie now" and population numbers can grow to reach the city's peak population numbers of 1981 again over the next 20 years.

But he noted that the manufacturing and heavy industrial eras of Sault Ste. Marie is over and the shift has already occurred to an exportable service community, meaning that the city provides services to outside regions as well as the city proper.

And in the future, the health and social service sectors will grow even more as a result of the aging population in Sault Ste. Marie and the surrounding communities.

Currently, about 27 percent of the jobs in the area are considered economic drivers, a higher percentage than most other communities, he said.

Even more surprising to city council, was that McCormack found that those economic driver jobs were "well diversified."

"On that note, I feel very positive about the way things sit in this community at this point in time," he said during his presentation.

He noted that while the number of manufacturing jobs in Sault Ste. Marie is not expected to grow, the output from the manufacturing sector will.

It will be the services sector where gains will employment opportunity gains are expected to be made especially in tourism, recreation and in the health care sector.

"Your future for your economic base jobs looks pretty good to me," he said. "Yes, we've fallen a lot in the last 16 years but there is reason to believe your economic base jobs will grow in the future."

A good part of the growth will be as a result of the baby boomer era readying for retirement. Those job positions need to be replaced and at the same time, most of those seniors will remain in the community contributing to the economy and in need of health care services.

McCormack said "I'm making the assumption here that the community is supportive about what is coming down the pipe and recognizes that if you're going to retain local youngsters, you're going to have to train them for the jobs that are coming."

He said the future is bright if the community works together – business, industry and education needs to partner to ensure young people are getting the training needed so the jobs can be filled locally.

"My work shows that this is the demand you face. How you handle it is up to you. I am realistic about the demand that is there and this should help you make the decisions you need to make in order to be successful," McCormack said.

Ward 2 Coun. Lisa Vezeau-Allen wanted to know how Sault Ste. Marie will fill the shortage being left by the baby boomers.

Tom Vair, the city's deputy CAO of community services and enterprise services, said employers are having difficulties finding skilled labourers to fill certain positions but the city is working with post-secondary educators to provide information on where the jobs are and what skills are needed. The problem is not unique to the Sault.

McCormack agreed and said it's up to Sault Ste. Marie to develop a community based solution.

Ward 3 Coun. Matthew Shoemaker wanted to know how the population projections are set, based on the city's past history.

McCormack said the baby boomer issue is one that hasn't been seen to this degree in the past. Their aging is affecting the supply of labour and there are not enough young people here to fill the jobs. While one person may come for a job, he/she brings a partner or family, creating a multiplier effect.

McCormack said everyone is aware that they need to diversify but may not appreciate that it is already coming.

"I think they get caught up on the latest craze, whether its biotech, or cannabis," he said. "To me economic development is go with what you're pretty good at and your numbers show you're already established with health care in this region and you have a unique advantage because it doesn't exist out of this community for many, many miles."

Other potential exists for growth in business services, post-secondary education and areas like tourism and service areas, he said.

Ward 1 Coun. Sandra Hollingworth noted that diversifying the economy also adds to the city's net worth salaries, the GDP and its tax base.

Vair agreed and said the city is looking at finding the right jobs with its partners and how to build on strengths to grow jobs.

The information will now be used to form a basis of the city's new Official Plan.

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