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Council approves community action plan

By Elaine Della-Mattia, Sault Star

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If Sault Ste. Marie is to transform itself from a one-horse town into a vibrant Northern Ontario city with a sprawling population it needs to implement a number of operations under each of four main “pillars” from now into the future.

The recommendations are among those penned by the community adjustment committee, a special committee formed to combat the stark reality that Sault Ste. Marie is still a “steeltown” that is highly dependent on Algoma and the steel industry as its economic base.

The committee was formed after the city received some provincial government funding from the Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development to study and develop a plan to grow the city into the future.

City council heard Monday from the committee’s chair, Gayle Broad, who summed up the year’s work and presented a 21-page condensed summary report to council.

More than 5,000 people participated in developing the report by providing input during stakeholder meetings, surveys or direct or indirect input, Broad said while reviewing the report.

Mayor Christian Provenzano said the committee “had some frightening and sombre discussions about the community and where it is.”

He said this process followed his own community engagement process led through the mayor's office and many of the themes and discussions were the same.

"I see this as a stating point, as a living tree, a growing document," Provenzano told council.

He said the consensus is that Sault Ste. Marie can be a vibrant community and has the human capacity to move forward, but it will take work and time.

The report states that the reality is the city's economy is stagnant largely due to the fact it is a one industry town.

As well, demographics continue to show an outmigration with lessening numbers of youth.

Statistics also show that the social health and well-being of our community are falling below acceptable standards.

The only way to change the decline in Sault Ste. Marie is for people and organizations to come together and stay on track to reach goals to change the direction and that will only happen over considerable time, the report states.

Based on the committee's review of best practices to develop a 'great city' it was agreed that a four-pillar approach to community development needs to occur, focusing on economic growth and diversity, social equality, cultural vitality and environmental sustainability.

"We cannot ignore any of them if we want success in the longer term," Broad told city council. She said some activities have already begun or are in some form of development.

Broad said Sault Ste. Marie under promotes itself and needs to do better to highlight the quality of life here.

The full report will also be available in three languages – English, French and Anishinabew – to reflect the opening and welcoming attitude of the city.

The city's community development and enterprise services department will be charged with taking the lead role for future development.

Partnerships, internally and externally, need to be fostered, and broad goals were established that include promoting the community, refocusing economic and community development, building a labour force for the future, growing post-secondary institutions, inviting immigration and welcoming newcomers, advancing Indigenous relationships and improving the well-being of the community and revitalizing the downtown.

The recommendations also include developments in each of the four pillars, specific to enhance quality of life from those perspectives.

The report recommends that stakeholders focus on growing from within and support existing business expansion and enhance entrepreneurial ecosystem in Sault Ste. Marie. It says there is significant opportunity to generate GDP and revenue by helping businesses grow and expand their markets outside of Sault Ste. Marie and the immediate area.

From a post-secondary education perspective, the city is encouraged to support their growth and encourage working relationships between the educators and industry to build a labour force for the future.

Supporting the Information Technology sector, global tourism and research in emerging disciplines and fields is also highly recommended in the report.

From a social equity perspective, the city needs to work to reduce the number of people living in poverty to below that of the provincial average by 2027.

It also needs to strengthen Indigenous relationships and ensure its citizens feel safe and included.

In order to improve cultural vitality, the report recommends adding a full time staff member to the city's payroll to advocate on behalf of arts and culture. The city also needs to update its cultural policy and focus on marketing itself as an area for digital and film production. It also needs to market local artists.

The committee also recommends that the city develop a community energy plan to discover new energy savings, technical applications and investment. It also recommends the establishment of a working group to grow the city's alternative energy sector and explore avenues of growth.

It is clear that we need to act with urgency to undertake the significant work required to build a bright future for Sault Ste. Marie," the report states. "By creating alignment, coordinating actions and making decisions in accordance with the four pillars approach, we know that Sault Ste. Marie can achieve sustainable and dependable prosperity," the report concludes.

Broad said that the committee believes the deputy CAO office should be charged with the implementation of the plan but they should not do it alone.

It's also recommended that an ongoing advisory committee be established to co-ordinate the implementation of the plan.

Ward 5 Coun. Frank Fata suggested the report could just be shelved and collect dust. He charged that a community's success is based purely on a strong economy, whether it be new business or growing existing businesses.

Provenzano countered the social welfare of the community can't be divided from the economic welfare of the community.

He said the city has labour force issues and others won't locate here if those human resources are not available. In addition, some people are not in the workforce because of social inequity.

"You have to develop a community that people want to live here and you have to develop a community that has the social equity," he said.

Ward 1 Coun. Paul Christian said the community needs to give the document and plan a chance to succeed.

"In order to for this document to succeed we all need to be part of the solution," he said. "We need to move forward to execute the plan and encourage every councillor to get involved."

His wardmate Steve Butland agreed. He said the development of the four pillars is something the community can relate to and now it is tim to ask organizations how they can help contribute to make it a success.

Ward 2 Coun. Susan Myers said while new breath has been given into this plan, the similarities include the fact that these plans are developed when the steelpant suffers.

While ongoing monitoring is critical, it's communication that is imperative, Myers said.

She challenged councillors to bring the document back to their constituents through town hall meetings.

"Councillors, we are the voice of the people . . . we need to deliver (this plan) again and again," she said.

Ward 3 Coun. Matthew Shoemaker said that council and city staff need to ensure that future recommendations apply to this report.

Council endorsed the plan and assigned responsibility to coordinate implementation to the community development and enterprise service department.

Council also requested a report outlining specific steps and required resources to implement the recommendations of the committee.

The report and motion was approved unanimously by city council.

The report can be found on futuressm.com

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