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NEWS LOCAL

Amazon application gets council's support

By Elaine Della-Mattia, Sault Star

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Coun. Matthew Shoemaker will not be running for a provincial seat in the coming byelection.

It was an easy unanimous vote.

After a passionate and invigorating monologue by Ward 3 Coun. Matthew Shoemaker, city council was easily convinced that Sault Ste. Marie could be Amazon's second headquarters.

Shoemaker told city council that he and Ward 6 colleague Ozzie Grandinetti reviewed the Request for Proposal issued by Amazon and were able to easily tick off many of the requirements, priorities and preferences that were included in the documentation.

And at the end of his pitch, Shoemaker received kudos from Mayor Christian Provenzano for his ambition.

It was even suggested that Shoemaker should travel to repeat his passionate argument to the decision-makers themselves.

Shoemaker pointed out that the RFP calls for many things that are at Sault Ste. Marie's doorstep.

Land, for instance, is any easy target with the on-line giant requiring about 100 acres of property to house a 500,000 square foot building.

"We've got this. The Innovation Centre and EDC have identified four sites in town, some privately owned, some government owned, that fit the bill," Shoemaker said in his pitch to city council.

Transportation, he said, can also be "checked" multiple times with the city's location at the hub of the Great Lakes and within a couple of mile of major roads, highways, rail, air and water networks.

"As a border community, the twin Saults have links to both the U.S. interstate system and the Trans Canada Highway, right in the heart of our cities," he said.

Other border communities like Windsor-Detroit, face lengthy border wait times and the connection with western Canada is not as easy.

While Sault Ste. Marie is not a metropolis city, Shoemaker's spin is that it is in close proximity to metropolitan areas and only quick flights away from international airports.

"It's better to fly one hour to a quick population centre than to be stuck in two hours of traffic and get nowhere," he told council.

And with access to shipping channels that reach more than 40 million people, Sault Ste. Marie's location can't be beat, he quipped.

As the alternative energy capital of North America and with an abundance of renewable energy sources, Amazon's needs will be easily met, with even fewer and shorter power outages than other cities in Ontario, he said.

The twin Sault's also has access to labour markets, two universities and a college. Recent partnerships between Sault College and Microsoft can be highlighted along with the Sault housing the OLG headquarters.

As for quality of life issues, "the Sault Cannot be beat," Shoemaker continued.

Plenty of homes are on the housing market and reasonable costs in both Sault Ste. Marie, Mich. and Sault Ontario, access to recreation is plentiful year round and community events are second to none, he suggested.

"The naysayers will tell us that we aren't the type of city that can sustain a mega corporate headquarters . . . don't just read the headlines and think it'll never happen. Read the RFP and think 'how can we make this happen'," he said.

And if by chance Sault Ste. Marie isn't successful with its bid, going through the exercise of preparing the bid, is a fruitful experience, he said.

At least one community member sent a "negative" email to councillors about the proposal after it received media attention.

"We need to change that attitude and we will do that," said Ward 2 Coun. Susan Myers.

Ward 1 Coun. Paul Christian took a cautious approach to the resolution.

"I see both sides of this," he said, calling it a reach to be able to secure the RFP.

However, he added, partnering with the Michigan Sault is "intriguing," and in the best interest of the proposal, he said.

But he cautioned Shoemaker that more information is needed on how important being a metropolitan centre is because that's one aspect that would eliminate the Sault in the process and cautioned that staff time is valuable.

"It doesn't hurt to try. I applaud you for trying . . . but you need to be pragmatic," he said.

His wardmate, Steve Butland noted that at least 53 cities have populations of more than one million people, and Sault Ste. Marie could be the smallest city to submit a proposal.

"That is where we will likely draw attention," he said. "I believe we can get some very positive attention from this."

Council also decided to form a small committee to help pen the proposal with EDC staff. Shoemaker, Myers, Grandinetti and Butland will serve on that committee.

The proposal submission is due Oct. 19.

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