

SAULT STE. MARIE

# THE SAULT STAR



## New Official Plan best form of community economic development

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Pop-up information booths were held across town, including on Queen Street, to gauge views and ideas about what Sault Ste. Marie should strive to be in the future. PHOTO PROVIDED jpg, SM

A better quality of life, a cool place to be, a city of neighbourhoods.

These are the terms the city's planning staff used to describe their vision of Sault Ste. Marie in five years time, after a new Official Plan is implemented.

Promoting the city and its unique location and aspects with a new Official Plan is the best form of economic development, said Planning Director Don McConnell.

A cool place to be would put Sault Ste. Marie on the same level as other communities like Niagara on the Lake and Guelph, where others want to come to visit or live.

And a city of neighbourhoods would see Sault Ste. Marie become a destination and complete community that can strongly compete with other urban communities.

City council received a presentation Monday at its special council meeting summarizing the background surrounding the planning department's early phases of its Official Plan document.

The questions and comments will be noted and incorporated in the draft Official Plan document.

The Official Plan serves as the city's guide when making local decisions on land use, development and public infrastructure, over the next 20 years.

When completed, the document will include plans for residential neighbourhoods, indicate proposed green space, identify affordable housing, develop policy to protect the environment, show active transportation routes and more.

The plan will be flexible and nimble to adapt as things change so policies can be put into place to reflect the reality of changing trends.

It's also designed to include projects that the city's population will grow by about 10,000 people and add 6,000 new jobs over the next 20 years.

Public input has already been extensive and that's important, said Peter Tonazzo, the city's senior planner.

The current Official Plan was drafted in 1996. It has since had many revisions but planning staff believe it is time to create a new document for a fresh start.

Council was told the plan will include eight overall themes including a healthy community, environmental sustainability, integrated mobility, sustainable growth, economic resiliency, social equity, develop a sense of place and cultural vitality.

It's anticipated the Sault's population by 2030 will return to that of the city in the 1980s.

It's also known that if the current demographics remain, the city would see a significant lower population in the coming years so it is important to market the community and grow the population to fill the jobs of the future.

Tonazzo said increases in various sectors are expected including health and social services and retail trade. Manufacturing will need to replace an aging workforce, at best.

Based on the projected growth and job demand, Tonazzo said it is important that the city has enough land and housing to accommodate the growth.

With projections that the city's population will grow by about 10,000 people in the years to come, Tonazzo said it's anticipated that about 4,000 new dwelling units will be needed.

The housing market needs to include about 10 per cent apartment dwellings, two per cent townhouses, nine percent semi detached and duplexes and 79 per cent single detached homes. The city will require a total land mass of 276 hectares, all of which is currently available, Tonazzo told council.

City council was told the rental housing community improvement plan will come to an end in September and council will receive information and direction in the coming months on options to extend that plan, said planning director Don McConnell.

McConnell said more than 300 units have been built under the rental housing community improvement plan.

However, more commercial and institutional land needs to be added to the city to meet the needs for the projected growth.

He noted that commercial vacancy space is double that of an average city while office vacancy remains in line with that across Canada.

It's anticipated that the land is mostly available within the existing urban service area with only minor changes needed.

That land will come from some small parcels of land scattered at the north end of the city, ultimately rounding out the urban settlement area and all already classified as serviceable sites, Tonazzo said.

Ward 3 Coun. Matthew Shoemaker raised a concern that the background document would allow more office space to exist away from the downtown. He questioned whether that would defeat council's purpose to create a more active downtown.

Planner Steve Turco said office space downtown would still be encouraged but also wants to see other downtown uses like food and beverage commercial space increased downtown to draw more people on weekends and in the evenings.

Turco said the policy would allow other types of office space equitably distributed across the city.

Tonazzo said the concept of “complete neighbourhoods” will be promoted that encourage mix-use neighbourhoods where residents can easily access a diversity of amenities, services and housing options.

The new Official Plan will also include the city’s transportation system and sustainable site design for urban developments, both of which are key areas where the city can have a direct impact in reducing the community’s greenhouse gas emissions.

Ward 5 Coun. Corey Gardi wanted to know if more active transportation routes would be added to the west end of the city to connect with other neighbourhoods.

Turco said the active transportation master plan includes all types of movement and spokes from the main Hub Trail to the west end are a priority for the development of that plan, he said.

The new style will also see future parks designed so that they front onto public streets rather than hidden behind lots. They must also be accessible to all users, located with other community amenities and be centrally located.

Shoemaker noted some park gaps in the downtown area and wanted to make sure that developers would be encouraged to develop parks in those areas.

Tonazzo said either parkland property or cash in lieu could be provided by developers and city planners would then determine how best to ensure the area is serviced by other parks.

“We will have a high level policy in our plan that encourages the community to look at these gaps and fill them in,” he said.

Tonazzo said there are some developments that don’t collect either land or cash and that policy needs to be examined and updated by council in the future.

“There is an opportunity to generate more parkland revenue and tools available to use that policy to its fullest extent,” he added.

Accessibility throughout the community is also important to residents and their quality of life, said Ward 2 Coun. Lisa Vezeau-Allen.

The Official Plan must also consider whether it should collect parkland, cash in lieu of parkland, and if so, should that cash amount be increased.

Tonazzo said based on public input, public access to the waterfront is cherished by the community and the new Official Plan will have a policy that ensures access remains open to all.

The plan will also include five locally significant heritage areas, artist studios and maker spaces and public art as landscaping, among other things.

Natural heritage areas will also be protected, based on the type of area identified.

Ward 3 Coun. Donna Hilsinger noted that while arts and culture are important and she wants resources dedicated to those areas in the downtown, the natural environment is also important and is also an art and part of the local culture on its own.

Ward 2 Coun. Luke Dufour said his focus is to ensure that the downtown area remains strong and assessment does not decrease if commercial and office space is added elsewhere in the community.

McConnell said the planning department's balance is to create land available to move development forward as needed but ensure that the downtown assessment value remains intact.

He noted that in recent years there has been \$120 million of building permits issued for the downtown, a significant amount indicating improvements in the area.

Mayor Christian Provenzano declared a conflict and excused himself from the meeting at it's outset Monday.

His law office wrote a submission on behalf of a client concerning the former Maplewood Golf property but the submission has a broad scope and includes information in the background document, he told council.

Since the purpose of the meeting is to review the background document and ask questions on it, Provenzano said he wanted to prevent any potential conflict from arising and believed the safest action would be to declare the conflict and not participate in the meeting.

A draft Official Plan will be presented to council at its March 21 meeting. A final series of public open houses and comments will be held before the draft is finalized.

It's expected that the final version will be brought to council for approval in July, along with final approval by the province.