

Northern Ontario Mayors meet in Sault Ste. Marie

By **Content Team** - April 15, 2023 @ 7:40 am



By Ron Jokelainen

A batch of ongoing, complex issues were on the plates of five Northern Ontario Mayors, who met in Sault Ste. Marie Friday.

It marked the first meeting of the current iteration of NOLUM (Northern Ontario Large Urban Mayors) and the topics ranged from heavy to well, heavier.

The five Mayors include Sault Mayor Matthew Shoemaker, Sudbury Mayor Paul Lefevre, Timmins Mayor Michelle Boileau, Thunder Bay Mayor Ken Boshcoff and North Bay Mayor Peter Chirico.

A major item: physician recruitment and retention. Shoemaker says while each of the five cities are competing for family doctors, and specialists, a unified, pro-North approach packs more punch.

"It's harder to (lobby) on an individual basis, said Shoemaker. "When we go collectively, on the same issue and say 'this a problem for all of us', the doors are more open to us. It's easy to dismiss a local concerns as something that is only happening in Sault Ste. Marie because of something we're doing – or not doing."

Shoemaker says the most pressing need for physicians falls on the family medicine or general practice side.

"We won't be able to fill all of the general practice needs just with physicians. We're going to have to look at alternate care options like nurse practitioners to help bridge that gap because our demographics. We have an aging population and a large number of retiring doctors. Those two things are coming together to a pinch point."

While the city's recruiting efforts have been good, Shoemaker says success isn't matching the number of physicians retiring.

"Our net doctor numbers are going down but we continue to recruit quite successfully. Every community in Ontario is having this problem." He adds more spaces in the Northern Ontario School of Medicine University (NOSM U) would provide relief. The retention of NOSM U's grads in the north is 50 per cent. "If we have a baseline of 50 per cent, we can build on that."

The growing homeless and mental crises were also a major topic. Shoemaker said city staff's presentation of its Downtown Ambassador program, a street outreach initiative launched in 2022, is something that might assist the other mayors. "Our neighbouring communities are looking to see how they can improve outreach to their most vulnerable population and we explained what worked in Saint Ste. Marie and what doesn't. It doesn't mean it will necessarily work in (in the other four cities) but they might try a variation of it, use our example and build on it."

Shoemaker is adamant municipalities can't be expected to bear the financial burden for health care issues. He says it's "paramount" that the federal and provincial governments provide approvals and funding for consumption and treatment services already in place in other parts of the province.

An aging workforce is an issue facing Northern centres now and will continue into the next decade. NOLUM will advocate that RNIP (Rural and Northern Integration Pilot) be made permanent.

North Bay Mayor Peter Chirico says RNIP's demonstrated success makes it a keeper. RNIP, a five-year pilot project, is due to sunset in 2024. "With Northern Ontario receiving only a small share of international migration while experiencing demographic challenges...there is a clear need for the pilot to be made permanent. Immigration to northern Ontario is good for all of northern Ontario. It strengthens our economies by helping employers address labour shortages – filling jobs that would otherwise remain vacant," said Chirico.

"I think the need for a predictable stream in the labor force and development is needed across all of our Northern communities," said Shoemaker. "It's something that we currently don't have but hope to get."

Timmins Mayor Michelle Boileau agrees. "We're exceeding the allocation amounts we were given so we definitely see a need for it to be a permanent program," she said.

"When you look at retirements and projections, it's quite concerning. This is but one tool that we have to try to adjust them," she added.

Shoemaker says the economies across the north are doing "quite well" right now but "in the next 10-12 years a majority of most of our workforces are going to be eligible for retirement and those gaps that can't be filled by natural growth."

Sudbury and Thunder Bay anticipate similar issues. By 2036, each will experience reduced labor forces.

"My goal has been to grow the population base to 200,000 by 2050. It's a lofty goal and the RNIP is a key," said Lefevre.

"Right now, in Sudbury, we have 3,500 jobs that are not filled. We've not seen that before. The lowest unemployment rate we have ever seen and so for us, it's a challenge and an opportunity. It's good news and also its bad news."

The shortage in Sudbury is projected to intensify due to world demand for critical minerals. With nine mines in the city and two new ones to open in the next three years, Lefevre says RNIP can help bring in the talent to fill those jobs."

Shoemaker says by 2036, the Sault should be over the hump as far as retirements. At that point, he says, the City's population is projected to be around 84,000. "We should plan to grow our community with additional economic offerings (at that point) as opposed to just stagnating."

Boileau says the next meeting of NOLUM will likely be in the fall.

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