



## Cambridge Chamber of Commerce MasterMind Series Feb. 5, 2020 Economic Transition

The Chamber's MasterMind Series brings together a group of members to discuss a specific topic related to business, or the community, in hopes of providing a direction for the Cambridge Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors in terms of advocating for public policies that will benefit businesses.

**Objective and Outcome:** Economic prosperity is the goal of all communities and smaller cities, such as Cambridge. However, it's not always an easy goal to obtain taking into account social and economic factors that can easily derail potential prosperity plans as community leaders and politicians become bogged down in the day-to-day operations of running a city. In Cambridge, the degree of difficulty in promoting economic prosperity has become even more onerous because our city is comprised of three separate downtowns, each with its own set of challenges. In hopes of navigating a path towards economic transition, the City of Cambridge has established a \$20-million transition fund to utilize some of its money generated out of industrial land sales to hopefully be used to enhance and develop economic prosperity in the three cores. Creating more amenities and outside the box creative spaces and attractions in the downtowns are seen as key components to making this happen. The pedestrian bridge, known as Craig's Crossing, is a perfect example of this type of thinking. The ultimate goal is not only to have more people visit the downtown cores, but have more residents work and live there as well creating a new landscape of prosperity.

The final breakdown of how this transition fund will be used has yet to be approved at the writing of this report. However, initially the City's senior economic development staff have proposed the fund be divided into three pillars: \$8 million in financial incentives for development in the three downtown cores to renovate/create residential units, tenant improvements; \$8 million be used for strategic land acquisitions; and finally, \$4 million be used for placemaking/arts/culture transformational type projects.

The following is a breakdown of several points that surfaced during a discussion among our MasterMind participants:

- **The use of these funds for strategic land acquisitions in the downtown cores makes sense, providing there can be assurances put in place the City is not competing with the private sector.**

The issue of using a portion of the transition fund for strategic land acquisitions raised a bit of concern from several of our participants who quickly pointed out the City should not be competing with the private sector. However, the economic department representatives were

quick to ensure participants these purchases would not be a 'land grab' on behalf of the City but would-be well-thought-out deals that make sense and could further the City's goals in the downtowns. It was stated a partnership has been struck with the City's economic development office and the Cambridge's three Business Improvement Areas to identify potential properties. For example, it was mentioned the City's purchase of a property near the Cambridge Self Help Food Bank in Galt could eventually result in a new opportunity to benefit that downtown. It was noted that an apparent concentration of several social services – which are a clear necessity for our most vulnerable citizens - in the downtown core of Galt wasn't necessarily conducive to fostering a sense of prosperity, and that some of these services could be relocated to more central situations which in turn could benefit additional Cambridge residents. Clearly a sensitive issue, City officials said any such moves would have to be done in co-operation with these services and that this is something which will take time. Participants were told the notion that Cambridge's downtown was 'unsafe' stems to an issue of perception, which quickly can change when development arrives bringing more people to work and live in the core. In turn, it was stated that any of these perceived 'problems' that currently exist would be addressed through a natural evolution.

- **Advocacy should be provided to guide potential transitional fund users through the process.**

This issue was raised how difficult it can be for those seeking to create business or development opportunities in the downtowns to navigate the current system in place at City Hall. It was suggested in order to ensure those accessing the 'pillars' pertaining to transformational projects or financial incentives to assist the downtowns be provided with an advocate at the City who can assist them through the proper channels in order to achieve their goals. It was noted that larger companies, such as HIP Development or Pearle Hospitality, both of whom continue to create major developments in downtown Galt, have dedicated staff who navigate through the planning processes at City Hall but that smaller operations do not. Having an advocate in place to essentially draw a 'map' to help all businesses would be seen as a much-needed asset when it comes to creating more prosperity in the downtowns. It was mentioned that the philosophy at City Hall was changing when it comes to providing assistance to those looking to invest in the downtowns. Also, in terms of the fund, it was recommended the process itself not become bogged down in an unmanageable committee system containing representatives from a variety of special interest groups and that it remains very streamlined. The economic development representatives indicated an advisory committee may be put in place consisting of a cross-section of groups, including manufacturers, small business owners, Chamber, BIAs, and arts/culture members, to evaluate potential proposals. As well, it was agreed the Chamber can also provide assistance to those businesses seeking to create new opportunities. It was recommended the Chamber could devise a future 'learning network session' on this very topic.

- **Additional incentives and revamped regulations must be put in place in order to simulate more economic prosperity in the downtown cores.**

There was a great deal of discussion centred on how current development can be hampered by a variety of policy issues, such as height restrictions in the downtown cores. It was mentioned in order to have more people reside in the downtowns policies must change to allow higher residential structures to be constructed but take into consideration the city's more historic properties in the cores. In turn, having more residential spaces would result in fewer parking issues since those living and working downtown likely won't have to drive to their jobs. In terms of parking, it was suggested the advancement of the LRT or an upgraded transit system, would certainly alleviate some concerns and that perhaps private partnerships could be struck to create a parking structure the City could lease until the time came for it be transformed into a part-commercial venture. Also, it was suggested the City remove as many barriers as possible to encourage more development, such as taking on the cleanup of potential commercial sites that could bring prosperity to the downtowns. It was noted that all it takes is one 'unique' development project – such as the Gaslight District, Tapestry Hall, Cambridge Mill condo/hotel plan - to start the ball rolling to generate interest and that City leaders must have more vision when it comes to planning and look beyond their term in office towards a future 20 years away. A sense of positivity and support from the business community, it was stated, must prevail in order to generate any momentum to achieve change.