

## **COUNCIL STRATEGIC PRIORITIES: EMPLOYMENT AND TAX DIVERSITY**

Earlier this year, Council decided to focus our efforts over the next few years on five strategic priorities. With these priority areas set, Council was then able to decide which initiatives to include in the 2016 budget (over and above the money allocated to ongoing services and day to day operations). Over my next few columns, I will focus on each priority area to provide more detail on the programs, services and capital projects taking place this year. The priority areas are:

- Employment and Tax Diversity
- Natural and Built Infrastructure
- Watershed Protection and Management
- Communications and Engagement
- Partnerships

This month I'd like to focus on Employment and Tax Diversity. This priority area is about stimulating the economy, supporting local businesses and increasing the tax base. In effect, it is our version of economic development with two tangible indicators to measure our progress and success. We want to boost employment, and we want to increase the number of property owners paying taxes so that we can spread out the burden of property taxes.

We are working on a number of fronts to address this strategic priority.

First, we are promoting that Ladysmith is open for business and for development investment. We want to increase the inventory of property available for strategic development in our town. We are working with the development community to streamline application processes and continue to implement best practices for community growth and investment. This means working together towards timelines and practices that meet developers' need for timely processes and the Town's need to respect legislation and give a thorough review to all aspects of proposed developments.

One significant development underway is the Holland Creek Development. We are actively working with the developers, and are developing an updated Holland Creek Local Area Plan. When built out over the next 20 to 30 years, these new developments will add approximately 1,000 residential units to our community. All these new owners will pay property taxes – diversifying our tax base; and the residents will be able to shop in local businesses – supporting the local economy.

Another development opportunity lies in our waterfront. We know that there are economic development opportunities both in undeveloped lands as well as in the Machine Shop complex and area. However, we also know that Ladysmith citizens feel very strongly that

while they would like to see mixed-use activity on the waterfront, they want to make sure it remains accessible for all to enjoy.

In the coming months, we will move forward on updating the Town's Waterfront Area Plan to guide future development. One of the first steps will be to hold a 'design charrette'. This is an intensive planning session where citizens, designers and others collaborate on a vision for future development. It provides a forum for ideas and offers the unique advantage of giving immediate feedback to the designers. More importantly, it allows everyone who participates to play a part in shaping the final plan. The focus of the Waterfront Design Charrette is to illustrate, in visual representation, the potential land use and design for the Town's waterfront lands, including the Machine Shop area.

As a business owner in Ladysmith, I have firsthand experience with both the opportunities and the challenges facing local businesses throughout the community. In the downtown area, the Town will be carrying out sidewalk repairs this year, installing new, bigger garbage cans (which are also bird and rodent proof) and continuing with revitalization tax exemptions to provide an incentive for property owners to invest in their buildings. Council and staff are also working closely with the Ladysmith Chamber of Commerce and Downtown Business Association to determine how best we can all support local businesses. We will be holding a "Business Walk" on June 22, in which members of our organizations hold conversations with local businesses to find out what they need and whether we can provide help, to build relationships, and to keep track of trends in the Ladysmith business community.

We have committed to working with the Stz'uminus First Nation to develop an industrial park in Ladysmith's south end, attracting more businesses and creating more local jobs. We continue to support the attraction and development of 'green' industries in support of our vision for a sustainable Ladysmith.

Council is well aware that one way to support local businesses, large and small, is in the area of property taxes. We have worked over the last two decades to reduce an overly large reliance on the heavy industry class (which is made up of only three businesses). However, in shifting that burden, we also need to be fair to the other classes of tax payers. In 2016, council adopted a policy that the business class would pay no more than 50 per cent of the amount of the tax increase paid by the residential class. To me, tax fairness is the most compelling reason to diversify and broaden our tax base. More property owners in residential, business and industrial classes paying taxes means more people sharing the costs, and that helps everyone. Of course, Council will continue our policy to keep Town budget increases reasonable as we work to increase the tax base.

These are the most important ways we are taking action to reinvigorate investment in Ladysmith in 2016. We see these as areas of opportunity and potential growth for our local economy and employment base. Ours is a community with so much potential. I look

forward to continuing to engage with residents and the business community as we work together to build a better Ladysmith.

If you have suggestions for other ways we can support tax diversity and employment, or you want more information, please get in touch.

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