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Building better communities

Liveable Peel Conference tackles tough issues on future growth

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The year 2051 may seem a long way off, but those planning future development in Brampton and Peel Region are looking that far ahead to take action now.

The Liveable Peel Conference hosted by the Region of Peel last month at the Living Arts Centre brought together regional stakeholders and industry experts to share insights, discuss issues and suggest sustainability strategies.

Peel has experienced phenomenal growth in the last 30 years and now has a population of over one million, which is expected to reach 1.6 million by 2031. And while growth brings economic opportunities, it also presents many challenges and issues.

There is no crystal ball when it comes to long-term planning of the business operations required to balance the environmental, economic, social and cultural needs of Peel's current and future residents. Feedback from this forum helps regional staff ensure that Peel is an inclusive and prosperous place to live, work and travel.

At the conference, Ontario Minister of Public Infrastructure Renewal David Caplan and the Ontario Minister of Citizenship and Immigration Michael Colle, both spoke about the province's part in that planning.

Through panel presentation and audience participation, a variety of issues were discussed including health, immigration, energy, Pearson Airport, municipal finance, housing, aligning regional services, environment, networking with the province, transportation, the aging population, culture, climate change, and growth centres/intensification corridors.

Speakers from regions across the country presented some of the strategies that have been implemented for issues similar to what Peel is now facing or will be in the future. Planning was seen as the best course of action to deal with the challenges of growth.

Dennis Cutajar, commissioner of Economic Development and Public Relations with the City of Brampton, was one of the speakers for the session on "Aligning Regional Services with a Changing Economy".

He said it is extremely important to have ongoing cooperation in managing regional services and city services with a common base of information on economic trends and economic indicators.

Cutajar said there are two parts to Brampton's strategy to develop a strong advanced manufacturing base. The first is to support the existing base and ensure it grows despite the strong dollar and the growth of outsourcing in India and China.

That support comes through providing the infrastructure - both physical and workforce - manufacturers need to compete.



Photo by Barry Pierce
Hugh Heron, (left) principal and partner in the Heron Group of Companies and president of Heron Homes Corporation joins Dennis Cutajar, commissioner, economic development and public relations, City of Brampton, at the recent Liveable Peel Conference held at the Living Arts Centre.



Medical Officer of Health, Region of Peel, Dr. Hanif Kassam, was one of the speakers at the recent Liveable Peel Conference that took place at the Living Arts Centre. His topic of discussion was titled "Good Health For Everyone - Realistic or Utopian Dream?"

The second arm of the strategy is to ensure the local economy continues to diversify, said Cutajar.

There is a need to build a strong service sector, which is the fastest growing area of the labour force and is where new immigration ties in to building a faster growing sector in the future. He said the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) really benefits from being a major location that attracts new Canadians who will come and help sustain its growth.

Brampton has the youngest age profile in the GTA and a growing labour force that will support the growth of businesses, so immigration is a more important demographic trend for Brampton than an aging population.

Cutajar felt the conference was a success in addressing the pertinent issues of balancing social programs with the economic realities of today and future growth and applauded the Region's desire to align services with the municipalities.

"In planning municipal services, whether it's a region or city, like a business you need to have a pretty good handle on the trends that are out there in order to ensure there is ongoing alignment. And there is alignment with the changes, but you can't just sit back and be satisfied. You need to keep monitoring the economy, monitoring the socio-economic and demographic information, so that you can continue to adjust your program to provide the best services possible," he said.

Hugh Heron, president, Heron Homes Corporation, and past president of the Toronto Home Builders' Association and the Ontario Home Builders' Association, was one of the panelists in the session "Put a Roof on It: Meeting the Needs of Peel's Current and Future Residents".

He thinks in the next half century there will be a tremendous renovation and revitalization of the region's cities, similar to what is now happening in Toronto. He also believes energy conservation will be an important topic in housing. Also, some are including Energy Star-rated features and building systems that cut energy costs.

He feels future house construction will be mostly modular, especially low-rise buildings, with modules built in factories and then assembled by work crews on the site. He also sees technology having a huge effect with "smart" homes wired so a computer controls all house functions and universal high bandwidth communications that make telecommuting from home offices the norm and home-schooling of children by the Internet possible.

Is intensification feasible?

Heron questioned whether the government's planned intensification as set out in the "Places to Grow Act, 2005" is feasible when considering Peel's amenities, a realistic housing mix, an aging population, roadways and traffic volume and public transportation.

He stated people in business and government need to talk and listen to each other, so they can plan and react together.

"It's important to realize that when it comes to planning for future growth, the new home building industry is not the enemy. We want to be part of the solution to the challenges that come with southern Ontario's explosive growth."

One of the challenges is building social housing. Heron noted it will be an important component of what we build in the future, and that we need to help people at the lower end of the economic scale and provide families with proper housing so they can meet the needs of their children.

He is optimistic that in 50 years, Peel will still be a desirable and sought-after residential area and that it has everything going for it including a proactive approach to building, which has put this area in a good growth position.

"It will take strong political leadership to orchestrate the policies of growth and change that the future will bring. Our industry has a lot of creative thinking to do to keep up with it all."

Region of Peel Commissioner of Planning Nick Tunnacliffe said they hope to have a report on the conference for Regional Council by the end of March. This will be followed by a second report, which will be a corporate project involving all the departments and the executive management team.

"It's important that we see the synthesis between the responsibilities of all the departments because this truly will affect the whole Peel community," he said.

Also, he said the conference reinforced for him that they aren't going anywhere without partnerships. And, having got that buy-in, they need to work with people in the community to build a better community, which is what he said Liveable Peel is going to be about over the next couple of years.

Proceedings from the conference and updates will be available on the website liveablepeel.ca

This is the first in a series of articles that will look at the history and future of services, programs and infrastructure systems in the Region of Peel and its municipalities.



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