



## **St. Catharines City Budget 2009**

**A Presentation to City Council**

**Prepared by the St. Catharines – Thorold Chamber of Commerce**

**March 9, 2009**

**Good Evening Mayor McMullan, City Councillors, Senior Staff and fellow citizens. My name is Steve Cook, President of the Board of Directors of the St. Catharines – Thorold Chamber of Commerce and VP of Operations at Credit Bureau Services Canada. I am joined this evening by Kithio Mwanzia, Policy Coordinator for the Chamber. I would first like to say thank you for this opportunity to address council tonight, and I would like to commend Council and staff for its open and accessible approach during the budget deliberations.**

**As the voice of business, the St. Catharines – Thorold Chamber of Commerce is committed to ensuring that there is a vibrant business and investment environment in Niagara. One of our responsibilities as a member driven organization representing over 1100 businesses and 28,000 employees is to provide input on annual budgets for cities and the region as means to ensure that the business community is properly included and represented in areas that could have a positive or negative impact on business.**

**As I have stated several times – and I will continue to remind elected officials and public employees tonight – prosperity starts with business. Without a vibrant, robust private sector – you cannot sustain a public education system, a public health system, fire and police services – and all the other amenities**

**that communities now enjoy. Anyone who believes that the public sector can sustain itself needs to be reminded that it is business that employees the people to pay the taxes to keep the public sector financed. Those in the public sector – yes they pay taxes – but they are ultimately financed by private enterprise and those working in the private sector.**

**With this in mind, we stand before you tonight during a most challenging time for business – and for communities. Your attempt to keep the rate of increase to 2.2% is commendable.**

**Tonight’s presentation has been developed based on input from our government affairs and finance and taxation committees, as well as Board approved Chamber policy. As members of the Budget Committee are aware, the Chamber has been present throughout the entire budget process. Our staff has provided input with respect to areas related to business, and both the Committee and City Financial Management Staff have been forthcoming and timely with any information requests from the Chamber.**

**I would like to briefly review the areas in which the Chamber has provided input throughout the budget committee process:**

**1. Through the Planning Department, a financial commitment has been made to implement recommendations by the Mayor's Development Review Taskforce's Open For Business report released last fall. The investment is earmarked for training and technology to better facilitate the development application process. This is a good first step – and the Chamber will closely monitor its impact – and we'll continue to push for all the recommendations of the report to be adopted in a timely fashion.**

**Our city needs to be open for business now! The effects of years of a real or perceived culture of complacency can be seen throughout the city – we can no longer afford to be seen as a community closed to business growth and development.**

**2. Last year, the Chamber recommended that the city undertake a land asset review of its land holdings as a means to identify surplus buildings and land that can be sold for re-development. We are encouraged to see that the city, and members of council, are pursuing the potential sale of lands such as the**

**Fairview Golf Course. As we mentioned last year – the proceeds of such land sales should be directed into the Civic Project Fund to ensure that our city continues to develop community venues without overburdening the taxpayer.**

**3. For the past three years, the Chamber has been aggressively requesting that the city undertake a complete, thorough review of all of its services as a means to seek efficiencies and redundancies in its operations. Again, we are encouraged by the steps that have been taken with respect to the department of Economic Development and Tourism Services and the more recently announced Parks and Recreation services review. The savings that have been presented are a good illustration of the need to review all services. As a Chamber, we understand that you will need to make tough decisions to close under-used community sites – but this will also provide an opportunity to work with community groups that are providing both the space and services that are often offered in duplication by the city. We support the direction that members of the Budget Committee have recommended with relation to removing under-utilized programs and buildings from municipal services.**

**As well – we strongly urge council to continue to push for a complete review of all the services by the end of 2009.**

**4. And – we would like to acknowledge council’s continued support of the Community Improvement Plan with the inclusion of Western Hill as a CIP district as well. The public can see the results down St. Paul St., on James St. and with the new residential complex on King St. The city’s commitment to CIP will continue to generate increased tax revenues well into the future as communities become revitalized, vibrant and prosperous.**

**Moving forward, the Chamber would like to make three further comments.**

**1. As stated in previous budget presentations, and stakeholder contributions to the Budget Committee, any surpluses that the city realizes at the end of a fiscal year should be strategically applied to debt reduction, tax relief in the following year and into the Civic Project Fund. This should be applied through a Surplus Management System – which would guide the allocation of funds into each category allowing for partial contribution of surplus monies to areas that will benefit ratepayers today, and help to foster a liveable, vibrant community for future generations.**

**2. With the recent announcement of awarded increases for Fire Services, we understand the financial pressure with which the City is under. The rising costs of fire and police services is escalating well beyond the abilities of communities to afford the services. BUT, we cannot afford to sit back and simply say there is nothing we can do as a city.**

**As a chamber - we have been working with the Ontario Chamber of Commerce to pressure the Ontario government to address the flawed arbitration system.**

**As a council – we urge you to consider making a request to the Association of Municipalities of Ontario that AMO become a collective bargaining body that can represent all municipalities at a provincial bargaining table with the Ontario Fire Fighters. This would remove the ability for Fire Service Unions to go after the weakest municipality in Ontario – setting a labour contract precedent that becomes the benchmark for arbitration. Municipalities need a collective voice – and we simply cannot afford to do nothing.**

**In addition – due to the \$6 million increases in fire services for the city due to provincial arbitration - the Chamber urges Council to review implementation phases of the Fire Services Master plan to balance the city’s ability to pay vs. the city’s labour costs.**

**Finally, although this is not directly linked to the budget, we must stress again the issue of the provincial Capping Claw-Back legislation that is taking \$2 million each year from commercial property owners in St. Catharines and sending it to Niagara Falls and Niagara on the Lake. Since 1998, more than \$25 million has been taken from commercial rate payers in St. Catharines. Our businesses cannot afford to carry this burden any longer.**

**We urge council to join us in lobbying the provincial and regional government to remedy this disparity and right this wrong.**

**Again, we thank you for the opportunity to present to you this evening. Good work on the budget, and we look forward to working together in building a stronger, more prosperous city.**

**Thank you, we will gladly answer any questions you may have.**