

Tale of Two Cities:
Mayor's Annual Address to
St. Catharines Thorold Chamber of Commerce
Feb. 5, 2010

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Thank you Bob for that introduction. I certainly appreciate Penn Financial's support of the St. Catharines Thorold Chamber of Commerce and of this Tale of Two Cities event.

I am pleased to be here today to share with you, the members of St. Catharines and Thorold's business community, what our City is doing to support business and attract investment in our city.

In attendance today from City Council are:

Merritton Ward Councillor Jeff Burch

St. Patrick's Ward Councillors Mark Elliott and Heather Foss

Grantham Ward Councillor Bill Phillips

And

Port Dalhousie Ward Councillor Len Stack

Also in attendance are City senior staff members:

Colin Briggs, Chief Executive Office

Dan Carnegie, Director of Corporate Support Services

And

David Oakes, Director of Economic Development and Tourism Services.

Before I get started today I want to take a few moments to show you a film that highlights the four (4) major sectors in the St. Catharines Economic Development Strategy:

- advanced manufacturing
- health and bio-science
- green industry
- interactive media

This strategy closely mirrors the Paths to Prosperity Report released last year by the St. Catharines Thorold Prosperity Council.

These two documents provide direction on which areas should be pursued to secure St. Catharines economic future. By looking at what our traditional strengths have been and future business trends, I believe we are on the path to success.

Many of you in the room today were involved in the Prosperity Council and the creation of the final report and I want to extend my thanks and appreciation.

The short film you are about to see, will also that illustrate one of our best resources and keys to success in the future -
- our talented young people.

SHOW FILM

This film was created by Lucas Baiano – a young filmmaker, Niagara-native and client of St. Catharines Enterprise Centre.

Using his natural talent, tenacity and entrepreneurial spirit he started his company Lumiere Films at just 16 years old.

He has completed projects for several high-profile clients – including the United Nations, which is currently using a film he created for Holocaust awareness.

Using his unstoppable drive, he convinced former US President Bill Clinton to send him hours of footage from wife Hilary Clinton's campaign for the Democratic Presidential Nomination campaign to create a three-minute film.

The film, which made it to the Most Viewed Category on YouTube, catapulted Lucas into the spotlight and helped him land a job that combines politics and film making.

Unfortunately, that position is in Washington, D.C.

Lucas' story illustrates one of the challenges for St. Catharines as we look towards building our local economy in the future – retaining our young people.

Every year thousands of Brock University and Niagara College graduates enter the job market with enthusiasm, knowledge and skills.

And it is imperative that we find ways of keeping these bright stars in Niagara and ensure they have a role in building a prosperous future for our community.

This is why the City of St. Catharines is supportive of initiatives, like the Enterprise Centre, that works with people like Lucas Baiano, to realize their goals and turn their enthusiasm into successful careers.

The staff at the Centre – which includes our new small business consultant Jessica Potts who is in attendance today – offers a wealth of information, guidance and support for all entrepreneurs.

It is the same concept behind nGen – the Niagara Interactive Media Generator.

For those of you who are unfamiliar with nGen, its goal is to foster new growth in the field of interactive media by providing support, office space and business advice.

nGen will help Niagara retain fresh talent and assist new business in an environment where creators and entrepreneurs can thrive.

Funded jointly by the City, the provincial and federal levels of government, along with Brock University and Niagara College, nGen is a unique concept that has been greeted enthusiastically by the business and academic communities.

With the success of established video game developer Silicon Knights, based Downtown St. Catharines, it is a great fit and logical avenue to pursue.

And it is this kind of proactive approach to attracting growth industries that will help us attract new investment and retain our young people.

Council has taken this approach to the bio-science field, also a sector listed in the City's economic development strategy.

As you know construction of the new hospital complex in West St. Catharines continues to make progress since the groundbreaking in April.

The new hospital will not only ensure the best quality care for residents of St. Catharines and Thorold, but also play a role in attracting new physicians and researchers.

The same is true for the Niagara Health and Biosciences Research Complex of Brock University.

This \$111 million development will enable the commercialization of valuable research while also providing opportunities for businesses in the areas of health, wellness and pharmaceuticals.

The City expects significant business spin-offs from the synergy of having both a state-of-the-art hospital and bioscience centre in close proximity.

To prepare for this St. Catharines Council has created an innovation zone in west St. Catharines that will target new industry including research and development, green technology, design, institutional and pharmaceutical uses.

The City has also focused on investing in our cultural sector as a way to promote revitalization of Downtown St. Catharines and encourage investments from knowledge-based businesses.

In May, the City received word the federal and provincial governments would contribute a total of \$36 million toward the construction of a downtown performing arts centre.

Built in conjunction with a new location for Brock University's Marilyn I Walker School of Fine and Performing Arts, this project is important because it will be the cornerstone for downtown redevelopment.

It will bring students downtown by day, audiences by night, residential development and new investments in boutiques and restaurants, making Downtown St. Catharines a destination, once again.

Recently there have been questions raised about the fate of Brock's portion of the project.

I want to stress to you today, that I remain confident that Brock will be successful in receiving the necessary capital.

This project is a truly unique partnership and represents a made-in-St. Catharines solution for both Brock University and the City's downtown revitalization efforts.

There are other examples of Canadian universities moving campuses to downtown locations.

But none were done with the level of partnership and co-operation that currently exists between the City and Brock University.

Supporting the arts centre and efforts to revitalize downtown will be the replacement of the Carlisle Parking Garage which has already started after the federal and provincial governments contributed \$18.6 million of the \$28 million cost of the project.

This is an important piece of infrastructure as it will provide parking for the new Performing Arts Centre and for new employers and visitors to the downtown.

It will be complimented by work underway to convert downtown streets to two-way traffic.

You will remember that not everyone in our community embraced the decision to convert our downtown streets to two-way.

However council persevered and this past summer cars began travelling in both directions on St. Paul and King streets.

The conversion went smoothly – so smoothly in fact I think even some members of council were surprised.

In 2010, two-way conversion is planned for King Street between Carlisle and Court streets and St. Paul Street between Geneva and Court streets.

This year we will also see the final concept for the conversion of the Geneva/St. Paul/ Niagara/ Queenston intersection. However work on the intersection likely won't take place until the following year.

The conversion to two-way traffic will assist in the relocation of the Wine Route to downtown, something the City has advocated for a number of years.

In July, I met with members of the Wine Council of Ontario to discuss this possibility.

The council was impressed with our plans and were very receptive to the idea.

I hope to have a commitment from the council in the not too distant future about relocating this well traveled tourist route through Downtown St. Catharines.

Investing in our downtown will attract private interest, while supporting things like the Niagara Interactive Media Generator and our broader economic development efforts will attract new businesses to the Garden City.

And the investments in our community facilities – items like the new aquatics centre – will make the city an attractive place for employees and entice them to locate here.

The extension of GO Transit to the region will further add to St. Catharines' appeal to business.

By extending GO buses to Niagara we have immediately widened the scope of local employment and business opportunities.

Suddenly employers and companies who previously did not consider venturing beyond the boundaries of the GTA due to concerns over public transit, now have St. Catharines as an option.

GO Transit – first buses and hopefully the permanent extension of rail service – will give residents, employers, students and visitors new options when traveling to Niagara.

The expansion of GO Transit also dovetails with the efforts to establish a regional transportation network.

I have always been an enthusiastic advocate of this service, both as a way to bring together residents of all of Niagara's 12 communities and as a way to support those who require public transportation.

Despite the recent challenges surrounding this issue, I remain committed to it.

I believe we can have the first phase of an inter-municipal transit system that is respectful of the taxpayer and delivers service to the majority of residents.

By allowing the transit managers from Niagara Falls, Welland and St. Catharines to implement the so-called “triangle” plan for routes between Niagara three main urban areas, we have an opportunity to gauge demand for the service before making a decision to establish another property tax funded transit body.

St. Catharines is a city that, despite the challenges of the global economic downturn, had good fortune in 2009 and has incredible opportunity at its doorstep for 2010.

And while Canada fared better than many countries, there were still many in our local community who faced job losses.

As Mayor, I am often asked what is City council doing to create new jobs – what are we doing to put people back to work?

As business professionals, you all know the answer to that...

Cities don't create jobs.

Businesses create jobs.

St. Catharines City Council understands that while it does not create jobs, it does have a role to play by creating an environment where businesses can be successful and, in turn promote job growth.

Small and medium sized businesses – those under 500 employees -- make up the vast majority of job creation in our country – about 85 per cent.

So it is imperative that we work to ensure that entrepreneurs and established business people alike have the tools they need to grow their businesses.

City council is committed to assisting all businesses realize success in St. Catharines – whether they are new or an existing business looking to expand.

This is the reason the city offers BizPaL, an online service that allows business owner and entrepreneurs a central place to find information on permits and licences needed to start or grow a business.

But we understand dealing with various departments, regulations and requirements can still be confusing and intimidating.

So the Development Process Review Committee was formed to hear from developers and business leaders about how we could make dealing with City Hall easier.

The task force has made a series of recommendations to council which we are in the process of implementing.

As part of these recommendations, Council has appointed Planning Director Paul Chapman to serve as expediter for large or high-priority planning applications received by the city.

Specifically, projects that will be considered for expediting are:

1. Projects in the Urban Growth Centre with more than 30 residential units or 50,000 sq. ft of commercial space.
2. Projects within the Community Improvement Areas, residential projects with more than 60 units
3. Any industrial use employing more than 50 people.

To further clarify the approval process for new development, the City will next year purchase a new computer application that will allow applicants to track their project as it makes its way through the process.

These additions demonstrate that St. Catharines is open for business and our willingness to work collaboratively to encourage investment.

One topic that continues to be discussed at great length has been helping local contractors and businesses to successfully secure business with the City.

I have met with representatives of the business community, labour unions and the chamber to find ways to assist local firms without violating our obligations under the Discriminatory Business Act.

Equally important we do not want to put in place a policy that will lead to retaliatory policies in other communities that will leave businesses shut out of projects outside Niagara.

The City has agreed to participate in the Chamber's procurement portal, Go Bid Niagara dot com and will also review green procurement provisions, as suggested by the chamber, which may advantage local firms.

As St. Catharines continues to support our local businesses, we can not neglect the importance of looking beyond our borders.

The world is shrinking for businesses and turning our focus internationally will be another way to secure St. Catharines economy in the future.

In the past year, accompanied by regional and local economic development staff, I have traveled overseas to investigate potential new business opportunities.

I discovered there is great interest from overseas companies to work with our local businesses as a way of entering the North American market.

While I can not give specifics at this time, let me assure you these are not fly-by-night operations, but established and well-respected businesses.

They have the capital and the desire to work with us and I believe it in our best interests to do everything we can to ensure these opportunities are not lost.

These aren't the only investments in the future for St. Catharines.

St. Catharines will see an unprecedented level of investment from 2009 and through 2010 – Some \$982 million in investment – not including the investment being made by the provincial government to upgrade the QEW.

It is an incredible, almost incomprehensible number.

St. Catharines has never seen this level of investment at any other time in our history.

Some critics will argue that a large portion of this amount is public money from the various levels of government, and not private money.

There are some major public sector projects – the new hospital being the largest at \$759 million – that make up this number.

But there are some significant private sector projects including \$43.7 million investment by Smart Centres to reclaim the former Ferranti Packard site and the \$70 million Port Place Development in Port Dalhousie.

And there are projects, such as the Performing Arts Centre, that will require contributions from the City and our property tax payers.

But where the critics are wrong is to suggest that this somehow does not represent a true investment in our city.

St. Catharines council understands that all government money comes from taxpayers – from your hard earned money.

We respect that.

Which is why, when Council decides to spend City money or asks for funding from the federal or provincial governments, it is for projects we believe will benefit St. Catharines now and in the future.

Projects that will make St. Catharines a place where people want to live, work and play.

This is not frivolous spending or a careless use of our financial resources.

We know that taxpayers' money is not an endless resource.

It is part of a co-ordinated strategy to strengthen and diversify St. Catharines' economy, so that it may withstand further economic downturns.

It's called having vision.

And for the first time in a very long time people are looking at St. Catharines as an innovator, as an up-and-coming community, as a city focused on the future.

There is a new optimism and excitement among our citizens.

Historically, St. Catharines has been a leader – from the first Welland Canal to the establishment of the milling and automotive industries.

Some may say we lost our way.

But the path laid out for St. Catharines by this council and our senior staff will help us reclaim our title as an innovator.

2009 while challenging for many also presented great opportunity for St. Catharines, which will continue in 2010

It was a year of good fortune and firsts.

And I believe the best is yet to come.