

2022 Grimsby Business Roundtables

SUMMARY REPORT

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Introduction

In January 2022, the Town of Grimsby conducted four virtual roundtable consultations with local businesses on issues related to business retention and expansion. Arrowhead Coaching and Facilitation Solutions was engaged to facilitate the consultation sessions and prepare this summary report.

Background and Overview

The 90-minute roundtable consultations were conducted via video conference on January 19 and 26, 2022 (an additional one-on-one interview was conducted with one participant who could not attend the roundtables as scheduled).

The purpose of the consultations was to assist the Town of Grimsby in completing its Economic Development Strategic Plan for the next three years.

As a follow-up to its recent Business Retention and Expansion survey, the consultations were designed to gain deeper insight and feedback on key issues uncovered in the initial survey results, including the strategic outlook of the local business community over the next three years, the overall quality of partnership between the Town and the business community, the client service experience of businesses with the Town, and challenges and opportunities related to workforce development.

Participants

Staff and Regional Partners

- Harry Schlange, Chief Administrative Office, Town of Grimsby
- Frank Miele, Economic Development Officer, Town of Grimsby
- Alejandra Wichartz, Vice Chair, Grimsby Economic Development Advisory Committee
- Rebecca Shelley, Executive Director, Grimsby and District Chamber of Commerce
- Ken Scholtens, Manager of Business Development and Expedited Services, Region of Niagara
- April-Dawn Blackwell, Associate Vice President of Professional and Continuing Studies, Brock University
- Gary Bruce, Executive Director, Employment Help Centre

Roundtable 1 (January 19)

- CEO, utility company
- Operational Leader, manufacturing company
- President, construction contractor
- President, equipment supply company
- President, manufacturing services company
- Owner, local retail business

Roundtable 2 (January 19)

- Vice President, building products manufacturer
- General Manager, hospitality industry

- President, manufacturing services company

Roundtable 3 (January 26)

- Director, recreational service business
- Founder, social media company
- Chief Executive Officer, industrial services company
- Operations Coordinator, industrial services company

Roundtable 4 (January 26)

- Owner, local restaurant
- President, construction contractor
- General Manager, local retail business
- General Manager, tourism organization
- Vice President, transportation company
- Owner, recreational service business

One-on-One Interview (January 20)

- President, manufacturing company

Key Themes

Participant feedback during the consultations can be categorized into five themes. Certain perspectives, comments and recommendations within each theme were distinct to subgroups of participants depending on their business size, industry, and business model. However, it was notable how frequently these same themes emerged regardless of the unique context of each business.

The common themes were:

- Workforce attraction and retention
- Skills development and training
- Town-Business processes and communication
- Planning and development
- Downtown improvement

Workforce Attraction and Retention

Most participants across every consultation session identified attracting and retaining talent as a top issue of concern, both at the present time and over the next three years. Several participants emphasized the importance of having and developing a diverse and skilled local labour pool in or near Grimsby.

No single issue emerged as the primary obstacle in workforce attraction. However, the most common issues identified by both large and small businesses included:

- Generally high cost of living in Grimsby relative to other municipalities
- Housing affordability
- The rapid emergence of remote work opportunities has created a significantly more competitive market for top talent, particularly among highly skilled and more specialized professions
- Transit to the central business locations in Grimsby is extremely limited, making it unattractive or impossible for prospective employees as close as Stoney Creek to want to work in Grimsby

Participants offered several specific recommendations to help address these issues:

- Facilitate greater collaboration between Grimsby’s business and industrial communities and local secondary schools to educate students on the attractive and diverse career opportunities available to them in their hometown
- Increase overall promotion of Grimsby as a great place to live and work
- Enhance and leverage the Niagara Gateway Information Centre to better promote Grimsby as a work destination of choice for visitors
- Conduct local job fairs to better inform skilled workers living in Grimsby about the career opportunities in their own community

Skills Development and Training

In addition to challenges associated with attracting and retaining talent, participants observed that technology is driving significant change in many trades and professions. Long tenured employees must be able to adapt to changing market and professional requirements for businesses to remain competitive in innovative global markets. Upskilling and re-skilling has become a central focus for many businesses, particularly in the manufacturing sector. Also, students and new entrants into the job market must be kept apprised of innovations in their chosen career path to “hit the ground running” in their new jobs with local companies.

Grimsby is fortunate to have highly regarded secondary and post-secondary institutions in proximity. However, participants felt there was an opportunity to strengthen collaboration with those organizations on a number of fronts:

- Facilitate greater local business awareness of and participation in co-op programs offered by schools in the region
- Support and invest in the growth of existing programs at educational institutions, union training centres and private trainers
- Create or attract an education centre to Grimsby focused specifically on local workforce training needs

Town-Business Processes and Communication

Participants took care to acknowledge the hard work and talent of Town staff while identifying several significant opportunities for improvement in the relationship between the Town and local business community. The changing nature of the Grimsby business community (e.g. more home-based businesses)

necessitates a change in thinking and approach. Most comments from participants centred on matters related to the execution of key processes and communication to stakeholders.

Process recommendations:

- In general, there is a sense that too many processes at the Town take too long, contain too many bureaucratic “hoops” for businesses to move through, and lack clear and consistent support and communication
- There is a perceived need for a “culture change” in the service relationship between the Town and the business community – more customer-centric, less process-driven and “bureaucratic”
- Responsibilities and accountabilities for different service areas at the Town should be clear and transparent to the business community
- By-law enforcement should begin with a more consultative and educational approach, rather than punitive compliance enforcement right away

Communication recommendations:

- Make a concerted effort in communication, program design, and stakeholder engagement to broaden beyond the traditional “brick and mortar” business mindset and acknowledge and support the rapid growth of virtual and home-based businesses in Grimsby
- Improve consistency of communication and engagement - particularly through onsite visits when applicable - with the local business community
- Promote funding and financial assistance opportunities available to Grimsby businesses
- Make extra efforts to promote Town of Grimsby procurement opportunities to local business
- Facilitate stronger networking and collaboration among local businesses (e.g. Downtown and Lakeside business communities)
- Demonstrate more awareness of and collaboration with local industrial companies, not just the small business community

Planning and Development

While participants recognized that multiple levels of government share responsibility for planning and development in the area, several issues of concern were raised during the consultations, including:

- Lack of zoning flexibility and a need for more mixed zoning and light industrial zoning (e.g. dedicated business park)
- In general, zoning conversations with all levels of government are frustrating and perceived to be overly bureaucratic, lacking a sense of opportunity and innovation, and not client-centric
- Communication and transparency to stakeholders regarding long-term planning is not transparent enough, particularly as it pertains to industrial zoning and infrastructure
- Infrastructure planning should include increased sewage capacity in support of the industrial businesses in Grimsby
- Permitting processes are slow and unresponsive to the specific needs and circumstances of applicants

- Relations between the Town, businesses, and local interest groups are too often dis-functional and disrupt constructive dialogue, problem-resolution, and overall progress in the development of the community

Downtown Improvement

Participants were overwhelmingly supportive of the need for a healthy, diverse, and vibrant Downtown in Grimsby. It is seen as critical not only to attract potential employees to the town but to service and support local businesses as well.

Comments and recommendations related to the improvement of Grimsby's Downtown included:

- Make a special effort to cultivate diversity of businesses in the Downtown
- Work with the Downtown Improvement Area (DIA) to improve engagement with downtown businesses and foster stronger unity between businesses
- Work with the DIA to strengthen its governance, resources, and staffing to make it a stronger force for unity and change in the downtown business community
- Develop a comprehensive plan to support downtown businesses before, during and after upcoming sewer and watermain construction
- Parking is in critically short supply and limiting business growth. It is a problem that will be exacerbated by the pending construction projects, and needs to be addressed promptly, transparently and in close consultation with local businesses

Conclusion

While there are certainly opportunities for improvement in Grimsby as noted in this report, consultation participants consistently expressed appreciation for the opportunity to be heard in this process and optimism about the future of Grimsby for its residents and businesses alike. The thoughtful and informed comments and recommendations brought forward offer a constructive roadmap the Town can leverage as it lays out its Economic Development Strategic Plan for the next three years.