

## 2012 Municipal Budget Presentation

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Good evening. My name is Christine Leclair and this is Rick Briand. We are, respectively, the president and treasurer of the Timmins Chamber of Commerce.

To begin, I'd like to take a moment to point out that, as an organization, we recognize that there are few easy decisions in any budget. As city council and staff, your work throughout this process is about balancing the bottom line against the best interests of the municipality and those who call it home; we respect the responsibility you bear in making those decisions, and thank you for bearing it.

That said, the Timmins Chamber of Commerce also has the best interests of the community at heart. With more than 830 members, we collectively represent an ever-growing segment of the community that has a vested interest in ensuring that this city is a great place to do business. As local companies prosper, so too does the municipality; what benefits business, benefits residents, and indeed the city as a whole.

It's for this reason that the Chamber sits before you every year to present its perspectives and recommendations for the municipal budget. We believe strongly in the importance of communication between the private and public sectors. In hearing what matters to our members, you may make more informed choices to develop the budget in ways that will build a stronger economy while encouraging growth.

It is with this in mind that I'd like to officially begin the Chamber's budget presentation, focusing on the following areas:

- Stimulating local spending;
- Planning adequately for the future;
- Identifying municipal efficiencies.

### **Stimulate local spending**

There are a few municipal efforts the Chamber would like to highlight as being potential ways of promoting and stimulating local spending.

Given the usefulness of the Community Improvement Plan grant program in years past, we are pleased to note city staff has suggested its reinstatement. This program helps not only to beautify our downtown businesses but also enhances community pride, and the structure of the program responsibly encourages business owners to invest in their own facilities. As such, we must also encourage the city to reinstate this program.

The Chamber would also like to highlight the ongoing importance of ensuring a strong focus on buying local. This important idea is something that must be pursued community-wide, and not solely at the heart of the municipal government. The purchase of local goods and services is something that benefits and strengthens the city as a whole: it helps to enhance jobs, the tax base, community pride and even the charitable donations made by organizations throughout the city.

The Chamber has been pleased with some of the progress that has been made in improving the city bidder's list in recent years, though as with any project, there is always room for improvement. We would be happy to work with you on any challenges you may face on your end, and we encourage you to reach out to the Chamber to further the discussion.

In the same spirit, we also look forward to working with the city and the Timmins Economic Development Corporation in promoting a "buy local" campaign, especially as it has been identified as a priority item within the Vision 2020 process.

### **Vision 2020 process**

With the Chamber already serving as a partner on the Vision 2020 process, we have been very pleased to note the enthusiasm the city has demonstrated in pursuing this important community-wide initiative. As we hope has been made clear through the Chamber's own involvement, we firmly believe it will bring lasting change to the face of our community, helping to enhance the city's appeal as a place to work, live and play.

As such, we remain dedicated to its support, and we similarly expect the city to continue its already strong support in the years to come. We recognize that there will be costs associated with the continued implementation of the finalized plan, and we recommend the city continue to find appropriate means of helping to defray those costs wherever possible.

This can and should include avenues that have already proven successful, such as accessing funding through various government programs. The plan will also require reaching out to the community as much as possible, ensuring that those who are affected by it are also heavily involved in its implementation. This, too, will help to reduce costs while also increasing the community buy-in that will be so vital to the ultimate success of the plan.

In instances where money must be spent, however, we recommend having specific metrics in place to gauge progress and to ensure that various aspects of implementation are on time and on budget. With an ambitious and expansive scope, Vision 2020 must have a certain level of oversight, one that can be publically tracked in terms of dollars and deadlines.

In all, we wholeheartedly thank the city for its forward-thinking pursuit of the Vision 2020 process. It is something to which the Chamber remains fully committed, and we ask the city to continue doing the same.

### **Infrastructure and development**

The future of this community is also tied in many significant ways to its infrastructure, something that has a drastic impact on development. Without long-term planning for water, sewers and roads, any city's ability to accommodate interested developers will be severely hampered. In many significant ways, this council has already proven its dedication to addressing the issue, and we appreciate the development of a 10-year capital plan. However, the complexity and scope of the problem will mean even more vigilance and forethought will be required.

Indeed, we must ask that future development opportunities continue to be very carefully considered when making decisions surrounding infrastructure projects. Without a proactive approach that takes the long view, the community will be relegated to continuously addressing various crises rather than working towards making this community attractive for developers interested in housing, industrial or commercial opportunities.

It must be said that, in particular, the Chamber has a very specific interest in seeing innovative, forward-thinking infrastructure planning in place to attract and encourage housing development; at a time where so many businesses are struggling to maintain staffing levels, it is and will continue to be incredibly crucial to have an approach that will allow for new hires to have a place to live, and allow Timmins to see the kind of population growth it needs and deserves in this robust economic time.

We fully understand the sheer weight that infrastructure poses on the shoulders of any municipality. Strategically thinking about such matters can help to reduce that burden in the future, and will allow for a more complete view of how infrastructure fits into the larger picture of city's financial health.

### **Long-term financial plan**

This approach to infrastructure will require the existence of a long-term financial plan – indeed, many of the topics we have discussed here today would be well-served if the city were to develop and commit to such a plan.

The importance of a long-term financial plan is something that has already been suggested by city staff just last week as part of this budget process, and it is something that the Chamber wholeheartedly agrees to be crucial for the city's future. At a time where Timmins is preparing to celebrate its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the city must ensure it is on solid footing for the years to come. In order to do so, there must be a complete understanding of long-term municipal priorities, which in turn will help to map out a responsible, sustainable, and measurable course of action across a wide range of municipal spending sectors.

This will mean that money being spent one day will not conflict with the next day's priorities. It will mean that the business community and the public alike will be able to have confidence in knowing tax dollars are being allotted in a way that serves a purpose beyond today. It will mean that progress will be more easily communicated, understood, and tracked. These are all elements which are key to a community that is well and truly capable of taking on the future.

It must be said that the Chamber is most certainly not against municipal spending; progress often requires dollars, and it is something of which the business community is all too aware. We are, however, deeply troubled by the idea of spending without a plan, when public money is simply being spent on the here and now, rather than carefully invested in our future.

Again, we recognize the many challenges associated with running the city, particularly at a time when we are playing a very expensive game of catch-up with our infrastructure. However, the city must be able to capitalize on the bright future that lies ahead, and the foundation on which this must be done is surely a long-term financial plan. With many priorities already having been identified by the city in the last year, this is the ideal time to develop one, and we strongly recommend the city pursue it.

### **Municipal efficiencies**

The development of a long-term financial plan would also benefit from a municipal Core Services Review. Much like our continued recommendation to avoid raising business tax rates, this is something the Chamber has long recommended through budget presentations in years past.

It is something we feel would help the municipality to make service-related budget decisions and focus city resources. With recent press reports indicating that provincial grants are on the decline, a core services review may also help to identify situations where privatization or appropriate private-sector partnerships may be able to reduce municipal costs. It represents a larger suggestion to find internal efficiencies, something

that is good advice for any organization seeking to guard their bottom line.

### **Collaborative Successes**

Amidst our recommendations, I think it's also important to point out some of the positive developments that continue to unfold at the heart of the city.

Chief among them continues to be the excellent relationship the city has built with the Chamber. Like many before it, this administration has been very diligent in working closely with our organization, not only through monthly meetings, but also by providing staff to answer our policy committees' many questions. The Chamber and its members have benefited greatly from this cooperation, and it is something from which we hope the city has drawn equal strength.

It's these kinds of crucial connections that allow a community to truly flourish, and it's something that is evident in our partnerships on many initiatives – these include the Vision 2020 process, and our joint lobbying for any number of issues that are important to the region, such as forestry. We hope to continue this collaboration as we look to address important issues, such as Ontario's energy rates.

### **Closing Remarks**

In closing, we understand that the budget process is one fraught with challenges, as many demands are made on a finite number of resources. However, the Chamber feels that the recommendations made this evening would be a positive use of those resources, and would set the stage for sustainable success in the years to come.

Once more, I'd like to summarize the Chamber's key messages:

We are urging council to examine ways of encouraging stronger levels of local spending, both within the municipal government and in the community at large.

The Chamber is also strongly encouraging the city to develop or continue its commitment to a number of important planning initiatives, including Vision 2020, as well as a long-term financial plan.

These can also be enhanced by determining internal efficiencies, such as through a Core Services Review.

Through all of this, we hope to continue our strong working relationship with the city for the benefit of all.

Thank you.