

Woolwich, Ontario
Summary Review

On November 14th and 15, 2019, I attended the Waterloo Region, which consists of North Dumfries, Wilmot, Wellesley, and Woolwich, as well as Waterloo, Kitchener, and Cambridge. Each of the municipal sub-regions has different growth rates and patterns, as well as differing challenges addressing population, business, and investment growth. I was brought into the region to do address high school students in the afternoon, members of the public in the evening, and to run a session with community members the following morning.

The entire region is experiencing at least some growth in their economies and their population. However, those growth patterns vary dramatically between regions. Housing, jobs, social enterprise and activity, demographics, and mainstreet business growth are just some of the common challenges that exist for different regions. For instance, while the cost of housing, and even it's availability, is a challenge in all areas, in some places the challenge regards senior's housing, while in other locations it is the availability of housing for young families and entrepreneurs.

There were themes that arose out of the group work on the second day and following a survey of participants involved in 'You Are Somebody' events. Following a presentation on the changes disrupting municipalities and communities over the next decade, participants were broken out into four groups working on the following issues:

- Mainstreet and Downtown
- Housing and Livability
- Activities and Aesthetics
- Cooperation and Ownership

The process was simple and straightforward, with only four questions: what is the challenge faced; what are the opportunities created in addressing the challenge; what does the future of your community look like when this is addressed (the story); and, what are YOU going to do this week to make this vision a reality. The participants seemed very excited about the process and shared great stories, but it was widely recognized that regardless of the issue, the challenge, or the solution . . . the stories were the same. They recognized that it didn't matter what issue they started with the stories merged. It didn't matter where they started, they were all headed in the same direction - building strong communities throughout the whole region.

After working on community building for 25 years I recognize facets of communities, their challenges and their opportunities, even when I am with them for only a short time. It is my unhumble impression that this region faces one of the most debilitating challenges any region and set of communities can face - growth and success. By proximity, most municipalities in the region are experiencing some form of growth leading to a general sense that success is inevitable. That is causing a growing sense of complacency (and eventually a sense of entitlement) in the general public. As well, leadership in specific regions has begun to adopt the view that their role is to simply demand more resources, either to meet growth pressures or from a perceived lack of fairness in distribution of available resources.

This creates a dangerous situation. No municipality will ever have enough resource to meet all growth demands, and the substantive growth that is taking place in this region will make the lack of resources an

endemic issue. As well, regardless of the current situation, success is not secured. Success is always a work in progress, not a destination. No one is ever done working on building success. Deliberate and consequential planning in an evolving world is critical to ensure prosperity is enduring.

This region needs better regional coordination and collaboration to ensure infrastructure and service investments are coordinated, to maximize both their effectiveness and results for citizens. It is also critical to ensure that growth is done in a manner that leads to smart investments and developments securing long-term prosperity, not just short-term growth prospects. However, any coordinated plan must account for the natural assets, amenities, and growth patterns of each subregion. For instance, North Dumfries attracts different people looking for a different type of life than those attracted to Wellesley, Cambridge, or Waterloo.

Those differences are a competitive advantage. Working together will allow the collective region to attract a wide range of people, businesses, and industries that are each looking for something that suits their needs. Importantly, such coordinated and purposeful differentiation can distinguish the entire Waterloo Region as having competitive diversity, without the historically instinctive competition that leads to duplication of infrastructure, services, housing developments, and marketing strategies. Competitive diversity allows the entire region to plan, invest, and market in cooperative rather than competitive ways, allowing the entire region to grow, but also the municipal sub-regions to grow in deliberate ways that compliment their natural assets and each other.

My final observation is an overt re-emphasis on a point made earlier. Although the region is investing in modes of transportation that will connect each to the other, they are not connecting to deliberately designed places, communities, and neighbourhoods. Most housing developments I observed, or discussed with people, were focused on traditional housing projects: single family dwellings on larger lots in tradition subdivisions that required a person to drive to go to school, shop, work, socialize, and the like. The communities I observed have strong downtowns that were aesthetically pleasing with great small businesses. They have character, beauty, and walkability, which is a huge asset. This is a hugely under-utilized set of assets.

There should be more work done in planning, zoning, and development to bring people to those cores with activities, transportation, and housing. If they don't already live there, they should be able to get there easily and conveniently, and whether they live there or commute there . . . there should be 'stuff' to do that interests them. Converting the fringe regions and communities from bedroom communities doesn't start with attracting more business to the fringes. It starts with attracting more people to the small communities that don't need to commute, and who would like to live, work, and socialize in those community cores.

The region has a lot of reports analyzing its current situation. It has so many reports, I would speculate it is suffering from paralysis analysis. Waterloo Region and its members need to start to take deliberate actions. My recommendations for action are listed below:

- Create a Regional Economic Development Marketing Strategy (no more than one page) with a clearly articulated vision of what the region will look like in the future, built upon sub-regional Community Economic Development Strategies (no more than one page each) focused on the unique competitive advantage each region presents.

- The next Regional Economic Development hire should be focused on coordination and planning, but most importantly focus on an execution of a coordinated Regional Economic Development Marketing Strategy and support for local Community Economic Development Strategies.
- Focus on housing integration with metro/core downtowns, with transportation coordination to ultimately link those cores, and what those cores will look like in the future. A Community Master Plan, for each community, should be done to lay out the vision for the public, businesses owners in the core, and investors, not only so they know the plan, but can then be sold on buying into it.
- Ensure Chambers of Commerce and Business Associations provide sessions that ensure ALL business owner (home, micro, and small) have an online presence (websites are great but social media is mandatory) so they can coordinate with the Marketing Strategy to raise the profiles of the communities, the business, communities, the activities, and the services offered within the region.

I very much appreciate the opportunity to attend your region. It is my hope that this brief report reminds you of the work we did, the ideas we generated, as well as a few steps to take as you continue to create a pathway to success for your region and the communities within it. Please know, your communities are starting at a place many communities strive to achieve. Ontario, Canada, and the world need the Waterloo Region to be deliberate and consequential in its endeavours, because your success will be a model to the rest. If you have any questions, or need any assistance, I am only a call away.

There Is Always A Way . . . To Succeed,

Doug Griffiths