

CITY OF FORT SASKATCHEWAN

Business Retention & Expansion Projects Update

Purpose:

To provide Council with an update on the Business Retention and Expansion, and Downtown Enhancement Projects that the Economic Development Department is currently working on.

Background:

At the end of 2016, the Economic Development Department undertook two projects that focused on supporting the growth and retention of local businesses. These projects were:

- The Downtown Enhancement Project
- The Business Retention & Expansion (BRE) Project

By engaging in both projects simultaneously, the Department will receive a complete picture and strategy on how to support the entire local business community, not just one area in particular.

Downtown Enhancement Project

The Downtown Enhancement Project was designed to look at challenges and obstacles for growth that are specific to the downtown area. As a Department we recognize that there is no one-size-fits-all solution when it comes to business growth and support. The downtown faces some unique challenges and obstacles that require a more tailored approach from the municipality.

Not wanting to duplicate any previous efforts, the Department undertook a comprehensive review of the revitalization projects and activities that had been undertaken previously. The project was structured to build upon these initiatives and continue the process of supporting businesses within the area. It should be noted that this project is different than the Downtown Area Redevelopment Plan (DARP) which was a major project undertaken by the City. The DARP focused on land use planning and concepts, a downtown brand, design guidelines for future development, and implementing visual improvements. As this project was a significant undertaking, the scope of the DARP was limited to these activities, and therefore did not include a strategy specific for business retention and growth.

The Downtown Enhancement Project is designed to fill that gap and provide some guidance on supporting local businesses in the downtown area. To achieve this the Department consulted directly with downtown business owners and commercial property owners to gather feedback on challenges and obstacles to growth that they face, as well as to get a more complete picture of the business climate that exists in the area. A series of one-on-one interviews, a focus group discussion, and an online survey were used to gather the information, which questions focusing on specific aspects of their business, such as operating hours, number of employees, etc. Both the Chamber of Commerce and the Downtown Business Association were involved in this process. Initial feedback from businesses in the downtown has been very positive. We are encouraged by the responses and look forward to the complete report next month.

The information gathered will be incorporated into a strategy that will make recommendations on how the City can provide support to local businesses in the downtown, as well as how business owners in the area can be empowered to achieve their own success through increased collaboration. We will share the final report with Council once it is complete.

Business Retention and Expansion (BRE) Project

The BRE project, similar to the Downtown Enhancement Project, was designed to look at challenges and obstacles for growth for local businesses, but on a City-wide level and not specific to any single area within the City.

This project was a substantial undertaking and involves a significant amount of consultation with the local business community, across all sectors and industries. The outcomes of the project will provide:

- A better understanding of the key sectors and industries with the greatest opportunity for growth and expansion
- A Substantial augmentation of the Economic Development Department's business database to improve our ability to analyze and manage data and trends
- A client management system to support current and future business retention and expansion efforts
- Recommendations on specific activities and initiatives the City can undertake to better support local businesses; and
- Opportunities for export development to support local businesses in diversifying their revenue streams and expanding their market reach

To achieve the project goals, a significant amount of consultation with the business community within the City has been done to date, with some still left to do. A combination of personal one-on-one interviews and an online survey have been used to gather feedback to provide a complete picture of the business climate in the City, along with an understanding of the challenges businesses face. The Chamber of Commerce has been an active participant in this project and will continue to play a role as we move to the next phase of developing recommendations and an action plan.

A client management system has been developed and the information from the City's business database has been incorporated. This system provides the Department with a greater ability to manage and analyze the data within from our licensing database. Expanding the information we collect as part of the licensing process has also helped provide us with a level of detail that we require for this project. This system will not replace the business license database or the current licensing software the City uses, rather it will augment what we have in place already and work with the current system.

The next steps for this project will be to analyze the response from the consultation process to formulate an action plan and recommendations. We are already seeing some early results from this project and have been able to achieve some "quick wins" to support local businesses. These include partnerships with post-secondary institutions such as the U of A and NAIT, and the province's Business Link network to provide support services on business plans, marketing, financing, as well as employee training and development.

The project will also identify key resources and partnerships the City can pursue to further enhance the support services that are currently available to local businesses. The initial feedback

from this project has been very positive and we are looking forward to receiving the final report. Once this project is complete, we will share the results with Council.

Next Steps:

The next steps for both of these projects will be to complete the consultation process and review the findings. From there, a comprehensive strategy with actionable items and recommendations will be developed to provide the Department with guidance on how to support the growth and retention of existing businesses across the City. We will provide Council with a full brief on the outcomes and recommendations of both projects once they are complete.

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