

Comments on the Huron County Official Plan and Sustainability

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- Paul Mennill, Bluewater Shoreline Residents' Association

1. Introduction

- BSRA is an umbrella organization for more than 50 Cottagers and Residents Associations on the shoreline of Lake Huron between (but not including) Port Blake and Bayfield.
- BSRA is currently pursuing several major concerns: services to residents west of highway 21; surface and lake water quality; sky-rocketing property taxation; improved community development; shoreline regulation; effective representative government ; wind farm locations.
- Today, as we look at updating the Huron County Official Plan, I will ask you to consider the following suggestions: be ready for a vastly different future; diversify the economy; improve environmental action, develop a more future-oriented education program; stay close to the citizens; respect community differences.

2. Huron County Review of its Official Plan and Sustainability Study

- I commend County Council on undertaking this review and in seeking broad community input
- I would also like to be able to commend the Council of 1998 who established an Official Plan which set out carefully articulated and far-reaching statements on how they thought the county should develop. In fact one of my main suggestions will be that Council should do a more vigorous job of actually implementing the guidelines which the Official Plan called for.
- The current task, however, is not to look just at the past so much as the future. In other words,
“What kind of future do we want for ourselves, and for our grandchildren?”

3. The Future

- It is important that the plan become more forward-looking and more flexible. The next 10 years will see deeply fundamental changes in our nation and in our local communities. I am not an expert, but I have been listening to some positive futurists (such as Canadian engineering Professor David Scott and American futurist Ray Kurzweil) who predict that our world will soon be surprisingly different. Kurzweil says there will be more changes in the next 20 years than there have been in the last 1000 years. Why? Our society will benefit from tremendous progress being made in information technology, in genetics, in robotics and in nano-technology. Here are some examples:
 - Soon our home computers and televisions will be fully integrated into one machine.
 - Remote surgery on humans will increasingly be performed from a great distance.
 - We will be able to drastically reduce the use of fossil fuels, and we will rely on hydrogen for fuel
 - Our electricity will be created in much larger measure through solar collectors in addition to hydro and nuclear power
 - Genetic biology will bring about vastly increased agricultural productivity
 - Genetic biology will also mean that we will gain control of human diseases and the aging process to an unimaginable extent. Human life expectancies could double.

- The average age of the population will rise even higher.
- As we follow Canada's immigration policies, our community will become increasingly multi-cultural. The need for improved community development programs will increase greatly.
- Our urban areas will increase in population and our rural areas will continue to decrease.
- In such a future, it will be critical that County Council develop improved procedures for staying in touch with all segments of the community and for keeping in touch with the rest of the developing world. We cannot afford to be insular or narrowly focused.

4. Economic Development

- The current Official Plan places a very strong emphasis on agriculture and manufacturing. This is appropriate as agriculture and manufacturing have been the mainstays of the life of the county.
- However, economic success in today's globalized economies cannot be based on these sectors alone. We must pursue economic diversification. As a relatively small slice of the Ontario population and being located at some distance from a major city, Huron County is very vulnerable to population loss and employment loss.
- The service industries are expanding and will continue to do so. While it is mentioned in the Official Plan, the potential impact of Tourism in Huron is not emphasized sufficiently. After all, tourism is the largest industry in the world and Huron County needs to take better advantage.
- We should encourage facilities to attract tourists in all four seasons. We should also enhance the service base for residents who increasingly live along the lakeshore in winter as well as summer.
- Services to older people need improving, and as the population ages and average life expectancy increases at the same time, this will become increasingly apparent.
- We must stop the exodus of people who believe that health care in Huron County is not as good as elsewhere.
- One of the keys to economic development is education. We need advanced educational opportunities for young people as well as middle-aged and older people. We must establish post-secondary programs so young people will be able to remain in the community and get a 21st century education that will lead to rewarding lifestyles and employment.

5. Shoreline Development, Lake Huron, and the Environment

- The Official Plan recognizes that significant development has taken place along the shores of Lake Huron. But there is a strong reluctance to accept the fact that many shoreline residents wish to live here through part or all of all four seasons.
- The level of taxes raised on the shoreline is out of all proportion to the size of the shoreline population. In Bluewater for example, 40% of the taxes raised in 2008 will be paid by property owners west of highway 21 and south of Bayfield. Current changes in the assessment system will not significantly alter the problem of skyrocketing taxes on the shoreline.
- A strong feeling exists on the shoreline that there is an unhealthy communication gap between lakeshore property owners and other citizens in the county. County Council should support vigorous efforts at community development to create more positive relationships among these groups.

- While the motto “Ontario’s West Coast” is used liberally to attract attention to Huron County, we do not pay sufficient attention to our great natural resource in Lake Huron. BSRA and others have been studying water quality for many years. And the conclusion is clear: there is far too much e-coli contamination in the Lake. Our municipality has invested significant money in studying this issue. Yet the efforts to make improvements have not yet produced the desired results. This is a tragedy. There are regulations – provincial, federal, and international – which were designed to address this problem. However, it is our view that they are not fully enforced.
- BSRA has called for compulsory septic inspection, proper fertilizer controls, and improved sewage systems. But progress is very slow. Until these things happen, it will be hard for Huron County to live up to the “Community Values” printed on page 12 of the Official Plan – where it says “The community values a healthy environment including the quality of the water and air...”
- There are also other aspects to the future of our great lake that need serious attention from Huron County. As the American and worldwide demand for fresh water increases, what will we do to protect our own interests? What should be Huron County’s relationship with the International Joint Commission and other international bodies?

6. Governance

- In order to deal with the rapidly changing future that lies in front of us, Council must find new ways to maintain close contact with society’s economic, social, and cultural leaders. A democratic government can only govern effectively if it remains close to the people.
- To many citizens, County Council seems remote. The county should seek ways to respond to its citizens in more meaningful ways, and to seek input more openly and freely.
- Current Council committee discussions could lead to a reduction in the number of county councillors. This would only serve to create more distance between the county and the citizens. It is critical that all segments of the population be adequately and directly represented on County Council.
- Towns, villages, and settlement areas within the county have varying aspirations. They should be considered individually and where appropriate allowed to develop in varying ways.
- The 1998 Official Plan asks community groups to “participate and be involved”. But some Huron County agencies have not been very good at responding to community concerns in a timely way. Not only council members, but also the bureaucrats have a responsibility to reach out to the community and to respond to community concerns in a positive and timely way.

7. Conclusion

- I would like to re-emphasize two of my introductory comments.
 - Congratulations on undertaking this initiative of consultation!
 - When you re-construct the Official Plan, keep your eye on the need to be ready for a vastly different future, to diversify the economy, to improve environmental action particularly in the lake, to stay in close touch with all the groups of citizens in the county (not just a few), to respect community differences.