

REPORT FROM THE MANAGER OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

DESCRIPTION

Re: Business Retention and Expansion Program

RECOMMENDATION

THAT the report of the Manager of Economic Development be received;

AND THAT Council approve the undertaking of a community Business Retention and Expansion Program

BACKGROUND

As outlined in Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs' (OMAFRA) Business Retention and Expansion (BR+E) coordinators manual:

Business Retention & Expansion (BR+E) is a structured action-oriented and community-based approach to business and economic development. It promotes job growth by helping communities learn about issues as well as opportunities for local businesses, and sets priorities for projects to address these needs. It is important to recognize that few communities can do everything they would like to do to support their existing businesses. The BR+E process helps communities to prioritize their efforts.

A BR+E project consists of trained volunteers who visit businesses and conduct confidential interviews with senior level management, owners or managers. Data analysis and action planning is then undertaken to address issues and opportunities facing businesses. Such activities can be conducted in a continuous format where the community cycles through all the stages and starts over again or completes a project as a one-time approach. Ideally, BR+E should be incorporated as a key component of the community's ongoing economic development strategy.

ANALYSIS

Earlier this year, the Economic Development Manager received his Business Retention and Expansion Coordinator (BREC) designation. In June, the entire Economic Development Department took part in OMAFRA's BR&E project seminar that outlined the steps to a successful program. All of this was in preparation to approach Council for approval to undertake a BR&E program.

The last known BR&E program in the community was circa 2006. Elliot Lake's current businesses face a whole new demographic of consumers and a vastly different competitive landscape. The amount of time that has passed makes the data collected and even the challenges faced by the businesses of the day outdated.

In order to realize efficiencies, the City would be collaborating with ELNOS in this initiative. Their goal is to conduct a larger scale, regional BR&E program concurrently with the City's. As a community partner, they would be leaned upon for administrative support and possible recruitment/coordination of volunteers to conduct the surveys. Ultimately, having access to their data will allow the City of Elliot Lake to learn about the challenges facing businesses not only within our municipal boundaries, but also in our region.

The success of the program relies on several factors but mostly on the buy-in of businesses to engage and take the time to respond to surveys. In order to add legitimacy to the project, it will be branded as a regional initiative and there will be modest promotion of the project as a lead up, and its outcomes post data analysis. Together, the promotion and the partnership with ELNOS as a regional initiative should encourage businesses to participate.

The surveys will be performed by a collaboration of Economic Development Staff and a group of yet to be recruited volunteers. Upon Council's approval of the program, staff will begin in earnest to seek out volunteers to join the project and be properly trained. As the City has roughly 300 businesses, the surveys will take place electronically, in person and over the phone. One of the key items of a BR&E program is to address green and red flag issues that arise during the data acquisition phase. Staff will debrief with volunteers on a regular basis and ensure that any immediate issues that arise are dealt with promptly.

Beyond reporting the program's findings to Council and the generation of a report for use by the Economic Development Department, staff are proposing a town hall for residents and business owners. This event offers pertinent and important information about the state of the local business environment to those that need it most and offers a forum for open discussion. The timing of this event will depend upon the length of time required to collect and analyze the data.

If approved, staff are hoping to begin surveys in mid to late September. Completion time is unknown, as many factors will influence the project including the time required to conduct the surveys.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

Modest advertising, volunteer facilitation and printing costs are expected. The survey and data analysis software are offered at no charge through OMAFRA.

SUMMARY

Staff are recommending that Council approve proceeding with a BR&E program. The data collected is invaluable and further, it shows the businesses that the municipality is engaging with them and is willing to remove barriers where possible to ensure their success.