



Economic Resiliency Task Force
Wednesday, April 7, 2021 10:00 a.m.
ZOOM Meeting

Present:

Co-Chairs:

Cathy Burghardt-Jesson, Warden
Cara Finn, Director of Economic Development

Middlesex County:

Kurtis Smith, Councillor
Kelly Elliott, Councillor

Lower Tier Municipal Representatives:

Demetri Makrakos, Economic Development Officer, Stathroy-Caradoc
Michael Di Lullo, CAO, Middlesex Centre

Employment Representative:

Bill Pigram, Manager, Community Employment Choices

Workforce Development Representative:

Debra Mountenay, Executive Director, Elgin Middlesex Oxford London
Workforce Development and Planning Board

Manufacturing Sector Representative

Gudrun Haas Director Business, Armatec Survivability (on behalf Karl Pfister,
President, Armatec Survivability.)

Small Business Sector Representative:

Kathy Manness, CEO, Strathroy & District Chamber of Commerce

Finance Representative:

Todd Copeland, General Manager, CFDC of Middlesex County

Agricultural Sector Representative:

Joanne Fuller, Member Representative, Ontario Federal of Agriculture

1. Welcome & Minutes

Cara welcomed everyone and thanked them for taking time out to attend today's meeting. Explained that rather than reinstate the Task Force; this meeting is intended to be a one year check up to review the action plan; discuss the current state of industry in the County; and to evaluate potential next steps

2. County Update

- Task Force transitioned into the Economic Development Strategic Plan Committee in the fall as planned
- Plan was completed and adopted by Council in December and formed the basis for the budget for the Economic Development Department for 2021. Cara thanked the Committee members, Task Force Members, and Council for their input and support in making the plan a reality
- The full \$138,000 in TRRF funds allocated to the County were expended and reconciled with FedDev Ontario as of February 28th
- Middlesex County culinary guide was so well received, it is being reprinted
- #MiddlesexStrong Campaign was very well received by the public and the business community. Masks, sanitizers, window decals, and now signs are being distributed widely across the County. The Countywide video featuring the Mayors, as well as a Shop Local video in Lucan Biddulph sporting the #Middlesex Strong have been appreciated
- Several online contests featuring gift certificates to local businesses proved very popular
- 5 municipalities now have Community Improvement Plans being finalized or in place; discussions with two others taking place now
- County has hired full-time tourism support staff and is hiring a full-time Economic Development Officer this summer
- New Visit Middlesex tourism commercial with the theme of “Something to look forward to” has recently been released
- County partnered with SWOTC, Sarnia-Lambton, Windsor-Essex and London to deliver over \$200,000 in additional tourism grants to businesses and support organizations for tourism adaptation projects in Middlesex in less than one month
- County partnered with the OFA and OMAFRA, MLFPC and Tourism and Economic Development in Sarnia-Lambton to deliver www.handstotable.ca; a project featuring local producers and their culinary partners to encourage the local food movement; over 700,000 impressions were released in a few weeks and 80 people wrote in to find out how to connect with producers and build partnerships
- County has sponsored several radio campaigns to support local business; shop local; and workinmiddlesex.ca
- County provided sponsorship for small business workshops hosted by the CFDC as well as International Women’s Day; all of which saw positive interest and attendance
- A new Visit Middlesex sponsorship program has been created for 2021. Details are available through the newsletter which can be accessed at [Spring Newsletter 2021 | Middlesex Economic Development \(investinmiddlesex.ca\)](http://SpringNewsletter2021.MiddlesexEconomicDevelopment.investinmiddlesex.ca)
- Investment demand for both new business and expansion has not slowed down despite the pandemic; people still finding and seeking opportunities

3. Roundtable Discussion re: Current State

Cathy Burghardt-Jesson

- Vaccination clinic in Mount Brydges has been steady. They were hoping to increase the capacity at the clinic however that was short-lived due to the limited vaccine supply
- County staff, volunteers and paramedics have been used as support at the clinic however MLHU is not showing interest in a mobile unit manned by EMS
- County has applied for funds for an on-demand shuttle to transport people to the Mount Brydges clinic however still advocating for mobile unit as it would reach more people in more communities
- There is a provincial subsidy for travel for those who lack personal transportation to the clinics but it is not easy to access and most people don't know about it
- Only two pharmacies in the city of London have the AZ vaccine and both are located in the north end of the city
- A lot seems to be riding on the approval of the Johnson and Johnson vaccine due to its stability
- MLHU is using their own mobile unit for group/care home situations where residents cannot be easily transported
- In daily conversation with MLHU over issues raised by residents; inequality between urban and rural populations; delays in roll-out compared to neighbouring counties

Kelly Elliott

- Spent the last week interviewing businesses in Thames Centre inquiring regarding their feelings about the COVID-19 pandemic and impact to their business
- General feelings of exhaustion and being run down are being expressed
- Restaurants are commenting that they can't keep up with the restrictions
- Grants are complicated to apply for and it's difficult to find the information as there are so many different programs
- Businesses that used the PPE grant say the funds were quickly exhausted
- Some businesses are noting that they will have a lot of difficulty keeping the lights on through another shut down; some lack social media knowledge; others have no ability to pivot by adding patios and the like
- Potential for a pop up vaccination clinic to take place in Thames Centre however MLHU has noted that this will be at the municipality's expense and that they must organize and justify demand in advance of commitment

Kurtis Smith

- Social media campaigns seem to be somewhat dangerous for small businesses right now as there is so much judgement over regulations and what they are or are not providing to consumers during this time

- Major concern for downtowns surviving the current lock down and impending shut down situation
- Lockdowns are forcing people to concentrate more into big box stores and other environments where products can be sourced at mass

Demetri Makrakos

- Conversations have been optimistic with local businesses/investors but can be considered forced optimism as people have no choice but to deal with the situation at hand
- Local food has certainly become popular; both in terms of local restaurants and farm markets
- People want to shop local but they also are very price conscious due to the state of the economy and cost of living. People are being forced to shop for convenience now (which in many cases will be Amazon) based on the restrictions imposed
- Provincial messaging is confusing as commercials indicate a need for all Ontarians to get vaccinated but there is limited supply and a very controlled rollout prohibiting people from being able to get vaccinated
- Grants are complicated for small businesses to access and loans aren't popular as no one wants to take on additional debt load at this time
- Provincial and international competitiveness should be key and tax breaks would be more appropriate than using additional government resources to administer grants and loans
- Municipalities feel handcuffed as they must follow provincial rules whether or not they make sense

Kathy Manness

- Calls coming in now are consistently negative
- Small businesses expressing they have a lack of faith and trust in the provincial government at this time They feel like they are getting whiplash dealing with all the changes in regulation.
- Watered down lockdowns followed by stricter lockdowns etc. are coming too late and are ineffective
- Personal services and restaurants feel that they have been unfairly targeted; along with small retailers who are not to blame for the spread of COVID-19
- Business owners are not grant writers are not experienced in this regard
- People are exhausted. Small businesses feel like pawns in the Provincial game to be seen as doing something to protect the public

Gudrun Haas on behalf of Karl Pfister

- The manufacturing sector is very confused by the restriction changes; shifting/modified colour codes, different rules in different counties, municipalities, postal codes, etc. Daily monitoring is highly labor consuming to navigate through all different platforms for compliance concerns
- Armatec continues to employ staff on a work-share basis as they did not want to have to lay off their workforce. This should have been a temporary short-term measure. Instead it has lasted too long and there is a major risk of losing workers due to full-time employment opportunities in construction and other industries. This is not the fault of employees... the cost of living continues to escalate and they need to feed their families. This puts future production at risk for manufacturers
- Major manufacturers such as Armatec rely on international business to survive and cannot operate effectively within this climate
- -Export licenses have been on hold for some markets for 18 months; At this point it is not clear if the reason for that is COVID-19 delays or combined with a loss in business and economic focus on the application of government processes and priorities
- Businesses cannot invite international visitors which is imperative to making contracts in the manufacturing & defence industry
- Domestic business is weak due to slowdown so overall sales forecasts are well below original expectations

Debra Mountenay

- Employees are reporting confusion/ frustration over all of the changes/restrictions
- The workforce has lost trust in government and in employers as employers have been forced to decide who is expendable and who isn't during the pandemic in order to keep the doors open
- It will take as long (most likely longer) for rehiring to take place following the end of the pandemic as it did to get through it; resulting in a major lag in the workforce being reinstated to pre-pandemic levels; businesses will be cautious as it is too difficult to layoff and rehire at whim

Todd Copeland

- CFDC Middlesex has disbursed its total allotment of \$1.5 million in relief financing in the past 11 months; \$1.45 million in loans and \$50,000 in grants
- Saw trend in Middlesex based female-lead businesses requiring financing as a result of COVID-19
- There is still a pipeline of seven or eight businesses needing support; 50% of which could easily be realized if funds were available
- May see a smaller allocation from FedDev Ontario to top up Regional Relief and Recovery Fund in 2021

- Seeing continued interest in start up and growth financing for local businesses despite pandemic challenges; may create a marketing campaign around this need to stimulate use of the CFDC's General Loan Fund
- Delivered 13 small business webinars over the past year; all available on YouTube
- International Women's Day was hosted successfully in a live/virtual format featuring several local entrepreneurs

Joanne Fuller

- Has been trying to reach out to MLHU regarding vaccination of agricultural workers in Middlesex County for sometime now with little to no response
- Difficult to be in a situation where you are representing members in both Lambton and Middlesex Counties and the vaccination situation is completely different in each area (Lambton has multiple clinics set up in several communities across the county; has already entered into phase 2 vaccinations and general vaccinations are being done on everyone 60 years of age and older)
- There is frustration among Middlesex farmers
- Complicated regulations are making it difficult to bring in foreign workers and get them working. Some farmers are reporting having workers in quarantine for longer than required, having to administer upwards of six tests on workers, etc. The costs are mounting and the burden on the employer is causing some producers to pull out of the market this year
- There has been a major uptake on local partnering and interest in local food. www.hands to table.ca project with the County has been a major success.

Bill Pigram

- There is still a segment of the population not engaged in the labour force
- Despite all that is happening, businesses across Middlesex County are still hiring and people are getting work within a matter of a couple of weeks if they want it
- People who have been displaced are losing their houses (in some cases, living in their cars) because they can't keep up with the cost of living
- The labour market is a mess with all of these temporary, and in some cases permanent, layoffs. Businesses and the labour force cannot adapt as quickly as the province is imposing shutdowns and restrictions
- Employers and employees just want to do what is best and are trying to sustain their families

Michael Di Lullo

- Like all employers, municipalities are working at keeping staff safe; trying to find the balance to provide service while ensuring staff can competently work remotely, where possible
- Middlesex Centre expanded its CIP at the beginning of the year and have had good uptake; proving the need and interest in the expansion of incentives
- Partnered with Western University on a BR&E project; one of the takeaways was maintaining dialogue with the business community so will be focusing on

continued outreach such as hosting another workshop this summer and updating the municipal website with further business supports

- Budget was passed with the residents and business community in mind; reasonable rate increase while ensuring service continuity
- Monthly and quarterly reporting taking place related to COVID costs and expenses
- Have had a few requests from residents/businesses related to cost forgiveness. Adjusted payment timelines for tax and water billing to assist
- Bylaw enforcement: goal has been to take a soft stance with education and warnings instead of issuing fines to the local business community

4. Next Steps

What Do We Know Our Community Needs

- Vaccination clarity; supply and equal and open access
- Clear guidelines that are easy to follow and do not complicate an already complicated and tumultuous situation
- Tax breaks in favour of more loans; allowing businesses to keep their money rather than borrow more
- Simplified and accessible grants that do not create mountains of paperwork that businesses do not have the time or capacity for
- Reduction in government bureaucracy that stifles the processing of required licenses; halts international trade; paints all communities with the same brush; decimates small businesses and limits the flow and commerce of non-essential goods/services that are not known contributors to the spread of the virus
- More consistency and learning from best practices of other health units

Advocacy/Communication Recommendations

- Stand up to Province on unfair rules that cripple small business and seem to target female led industries (hair and nail salons; etc.) that are highly trained in safety measures and not known contributors to the spread of Covid-19
- Advocate for more open vaccinations and more mobile sites (at major employer locations; in multiple communities) to get more people back moving the economy forward rather than sitting at home waiting their turn
- Keep up shop local and feature business campaigns
- Offer professional expertise to small businesses that have trouble with grant writing, social media, etc.
- Design and distribute a business check-in survey to add to the comments gathered today
- Task Force minutes to be presented to County Council on April 13th with a request to have a letter drafted to the Premier and local MPPs addressing concerns raised
- Suggestion to seek support/share correspondence with SCOR/WOWC/OCC

5. Meeting Schedule & Adjournment

- It was decided through consensus that another meeting will be held in 4-6 weeks to determine the state of the economy as we head into the summer months
- Next Meeting: TBD - Cara will provide details
- The meeting adjourned at 12:15 p.m.