



Report No.
ADM-30-2023

File No.

Directed to: Mayor Joe Preston and Members of City Council

Meeting Date:
November 6, 2023

Department: Office of the City Manager

Attachment

Prepared By: Taylor Mooney, Strategic Initiatives Manager

Subject: Strategic Plan Refresh: Public Engagement Update

Recommendation:

THAT: Strategic Plan Refresh: Public Engagement Update be received for information.

Background:

The Strategic Plan is a significant document that identifies Council’s vision, mission, and the strategic areas of focus, while providing specific outcomes, expected results, and strategies that Council and Civic Administration will deliver on together.

In June 2023, with the support of Council, the City of St. Thomas retained Climb Consulting to help conduct a Strategic Plan Refresh. As part of this work, Climb identified a robust community engagement strategy with the goals of both educating and engaging residents as part of the strategic planning process. Following a successful online public survey in the Spring of 2023, in September and October three (3) Community Town Hall meetings were hosted in the City. The three sessions took place at various times and locations, both physically and virtually, to provide a variety of options for those that were interested in participating. The three meetings were as follows:

- a. Tuesday, September 19, 2023: 12:00 – 1:30PM at the Joe Thornton Community Centre (20 participants)
- b. Thursday, September 21, 2023: 6:30-8:00PM via ZOOM (10 participants)
- c. Thursday, October 12, 2023: 6:00-7:30PM at the St. Thomas Public Library (25 participants)

As part of these sessions, Climb Consulting and City staff were provided with ideas and input from individuals who live, work, and access services in St. Thomas; a crucial component to developing a strategic plan that addresses what is most important to our community. At each meeting, several round table conversations led by a facilitator focused on the future of St. Thomas. The following questions were posed to those in attendance:

- a. What do you feel the City of St. Thomas’ greatest strengths are? What are the things you are proud of and want to sustain?
- b. What do you feel are the two most important opportunities and two most important issues facing the City of St. Thomas?
- c. What actions do you feel the City should prioritize to address those opportunities / issues?
- d. Looking out five years, what are your aspirations for the City of St. Thomas? Describe the type of city St. Thomas will be and how it will benefit and positively impact the City’s residents and diverse communities.

Discussions were both lively and constructive, with those in attendance expressing a strong desire to be kept informed and engaged throughout the strategic planning process. The following information is a summary of the key themes that developed from the three Town Hall meetings and encompass thoughts and ideas around St. Thomas’ strengths, limitations, threats, priorities, and vision.

St. Thomas Strengths

Strong Sense of Community and Pride in St. Thomas

- Safe and secure community.
- Strong sense of community and friendly atmosphere.
- Small town, friendly culture but has access to bigger city amenities and services.
- The city has embraced its heritage through initiatives like murals and statues, promoting a sense of identity.
- Community members actively contribute to fundraising and community development.
- Strong community involvement and pride in local accomplishments.
- The ease of making friends and the strong sense of community.
- Positive volunteer programs.
- Healing and supportive community, where people care and want you to do well.

- Council is open to feedback and discussions with residents about challenges the City is facing and what people need to thrive.
- We are free. People value the freedom to move about without government restrictions.
- A willingness to support local initiatives and causes.

Awesome Parks and Green Space Preservation

- Residents value the parks, trails and green spaces, elevated park.
- Everyone likes 'Pinafore Park.'
- Value the agricultural lands throughout the area.
- Conveniently located close to agriculture, with fresh produce, beaches, dairy lands.
- Splashpads and parks are an asset for children and families.

Excellent Amenities

- 'I have everything I need in St. Thomas.'
- Recreation and sports amenities.
- Excellent hospital and schools.
- Great cultural amenities, like an art centre and valuable art collection.
- Welcoming, inclusive, and engaging library.

Growing Community

- City has been revitalized; we are growing.
- We are ready and excited to grow.
- Battery plant is coming to St. Thomas, which will expand our community significantly over the coming years.
- We have room to expand and grow, but we will need the infrastructure to build a great city.
- St. Thomas is becoming a multi-cultural city.
- Excellent location – well placed proximity to 401, London, Toronto, US border, KW, etc.
- Lower taxes compared to other cities which helps with affordability.
- Growth in international students in the city is very positive; makes the city more vibrant.

Flourishing Economic Development

- Economically thriving as a community with more large businesses coming to the City.
- Opportunities for entrepreneurs.
- More jobs for residents and jobs to attract new residents to the City.
- Supportive community for business.

Caring Community Services

- Indwell housing solutions are innovative (i.e., The Station).
- Healthcare, childcare, and social services, like Grace Café and The Inn Out of the Cold, Elgin.
- Mental health services.
- Special Constable Community Resource Officer Satellite Office in downtown St. Thomas.
- Hospice is coming to City to support palliative care patients.
- Good outreach services to vulnerable populations in the City.

Robust Infrastructure

- Positive comments about the city's ability to complete infrastructure projects on time and under budget.
- Focus on the importance of maintaining and improving roads and infrastructure.
- Positive sentiments about improvements in City infrastructure.
- Pride in recent downtown improvements.

Addressing Social Issues

- The City is trying hard to address the social issues in St. Thomas. Organizations like the police, Indwell, community agencies, The Inn, churches, etc. are making a difference.
- 'Housing with supports' options for the most vulnerable individuals is helpful but we need to do more.

St. Thomas Limitations / Concerns

Trust and Communication Issues

- Trust issues with government and Council – transparency issues related to communication and engagement.
- Need transparency related to decisions about new growth and companies coming into St. Thomas. We need transparency in how decisions are being made that will significantly impact the City and the residents.
 - We also need more information about the VW plan and what is going to happen, the timelines, how it will be funded, etc.
 - How will we ensure there are no safety issues at the new plant?
 - Disclosure about pay rates and the types of jobs that the plant will create.
- Some participants do not feel they have a voice at City Council and that there is not an accessible process for sharing concerns and engaging in discussions and decision-making.

- The Communications Strategy that the city is using does not fully meet residents' needs. We need to ensure that there is a multi-faceted approach to how communication happens that addresses the different needs of people, including print (flyers/inserts/notices), radio, signage, media, website, social media, meetings, etc.

Infrastructure

- City must ensure they have a long-term plan for how they will grow and develop our lands.
- Ensure our roads are planned to accommodate the growth in the city.
- Railway companies need to fix the rail tracks that go through the City.
- Improve snow removal processes.
- Greater focus on developing tourism infrastructure is required, such as more hotels.
- We need a community centre, that has a pool, sports complex, programs for people of all ages, and other services. We have been asking for this for a long time.
- Want to see commercial hubs in each part of the City so people have access to what they need close by.
- Better lighting in public spaces across the city, such as Orchard Park.
- Need more schools to support the growth.
- Animal shelter is embarrassing, out of date. Not a good place for animals to go.
- 5g mobile network towers may be physically harming people. There is proven science that they are harming our health and how can we influence decisions related to safety issues.

Social Issues

- St. Thomas is losing its affordability. Not what it used to be.
- Addictions and mental health issues are complex, and we need to support people who are facing these issues and improve access to services and programs that can support them.
- Concerns about police and paramedic response time and impact due to the rising social issues in the City.
- Public safety concerns. Spirit of fear exists among older residents, especially in downtown and west end.
- There is a concern about drug addicts causing issues in parks, public spaces and downtown, which impacts the quality of life and safety for residents.
- Absentee landlords – not taking care of their properties for tenants – slum lords --- accountability. Landlords need to be held accountable for looking after their properties.
- It is important to eliminate the needles on the streets; perhaps establish a needle exchange.

Homelessness

- Rise in homelessness and concerns about what the action plan is going to be to address the issue.
- Belief that the city's downtown core has deteriorated, and it is due to homelessness and other social issues. Fear that action is not being taken quick enough to address the needs.
- Sentiments that people are losing their businesses due to the impact of homelessness, especially in downtown.
- Difficult to rent downtown spaces due to homelessness.
- Concern that the Police Services do not have any power / ability to take action related to solving the homeless situation.

Downtown Development / Rejuvenation

- Preserve the downtown core, and the heritage buildings within downtown.
- Business owners, church leaders and members, visitors and residents do not feel safe in downtown the way they once did.
- Social issues, such as addictions, mental health, and homelessness are impacting our downtown. We need to find solutions to these important issues.
- Downtown area is declining. Some buildings are boarded up and we do not look like we are open for business.
- There is a strong desire to develop and maintain a vibrant and thriving downtown area.
- Police Satellite Office that houses the Special Constable Community Resource Officer team should be open 24 hours / day, 7 days per week (note: The Police are extending hours to operate this satellite location 24/7).

Recreation and Accessibility

- A need for better recreational facilities and accessibility, including affordable indoor swimming options.
- Concerns about the lack of availability of stores and schools in some neighborhoods.
- Expand mobility options throughout the city.
- We need more walkable and connected trails.
- More recreational spaces are needed.
- The need for more indoor facilities and programming, particularly for seniors.
- It would be helpful to have a community centre that attracts diverse people.'
- We can do more related to tourism and bringing visitors to the City. More hotels needed in the City.

Transportation and Accessibility

- Need a transit system within the City and connected to other communities.

- We are not connected to London and other surrounding communities through a transit system, and this creates real issues for people. It is isolating and makes it difficult for our most vulnerable citizens and for people who do not drive to access the services they need.
- Opportunities to improve accessibility across the City. Identify opportunities for improving access for people with disabilities (i.e., wheelchair and curb spaces)
- Provide transit options to connect our residents to employer sites, such as the new VW plant, fertilizer plant, social, etc.
- Expand our transit to support education and students moving between St. Thomas and London college and university campuses.
- Connect trails across the City.

Growth and Development

- Develop a plan for sustainable community development – what does the next 25 years look like? What kind of city do we want St. Thomas to be?
- Ensure we have responsible growth and infrastructure planning.
- City must advocate for the development of new schools in St. Thomas, to align to the population growth.
- Concerns about high-rise developments in specific neighborhoods.
- Calls for more green space and initiatives to combat climate change.
- Expand bike infrastructure and transportation infrastructure to support growth.
- Need to have an emergency preparedness plan that reflects risks associated with complex growth and industrial growth (i.e., batteries plant).
- Concern about the VW plant’s impact on the environment / ecosystem.

Environmental Issues

- A desire for more garbage cans on trails to address litter.
- Concerns about the management of dog waste in public spaces (i.e., trails and parks).
- Ensure we are protecting / expanding our green canopy across the City.
- Protect our community gardens.
- When planning new developments, ensure the environment and surrounding environment is part of the discussion.

Community Engagement

- It is important to increase engagement of our City residents to work together to tackle social issues and challenges facing the city.
- The more we work together as a community, the stronger we will be.
- Develop a plan for how to raise civic engagement.

St. Thomas Threats

Social Issues:

- Participants feel that social issues, such as homelessness, poverty, addictions, and mental health continue to grow.
 - Recognize that these issues are complex and often intersectional.
 - Acknowledge the complexity of addiction and mental health issues and the need for comprehensive solutions rather than quick fixes.
- They speak about the impact these issues have on the health and well-being of all residents, businesses (particularly in the downtown) and our community as a whole.
- There is a strong desire to address these issues in a thoughtful, compassionate and proactive way, to improve outcomes for the individuals who are impacted, and the broader communities.

Affordable Housing:

- Worried about how expensive housing is. Concerns that young people will not be able to rent or purchase housing in St. Thomas?
- Concerns about the sustainability and affordability of rapid community growth?
- Concern that the lack of housing stock and affordable stock will limit the City’s ability to attract and retain workers.
- Worried that we can do more to advocate for diverse building types and eliminate exclusionary zoning practices to promote inclusive development.
- Ensure absentee landlords are held accountable for caring for their buildings.
- It is important to re-enact rent controls.

Transportation / Mobility:

- Concerns about limited mobility and access to services, suggesting that there should be better transportation options for St. Thomas residents.
- Currently we have disconnected cycling paths and transportation network – need alignment.

- Worried that the City has an ineffective transit system and that there is a growing need for active transportation options to address congestion as the city expands.
- Participants feel the lack of transit options to London are unacceptable. Transit to London is critical for employees who work in London, for access to healthcare and other services, for students to travel to university / college, etc.
- Concerns about Government placing restrictions on the mobility of citizens. Participants want to ensure that there is freedom to move freely and act independently, with no government interference or surveillance.

Homelessness:

- People feel homelessness is an issue that affects everyone and that addressing it is an opportunity for community growth and compassion.

Addictions:

- Participants acknowledge the complexity of addiction issues and the need for comprehensive solutions rather than quick fixes but are worried about the impact of this social issue.

Social Services:

- Concerns that we have insufficient social services, including shelters, rehab facilities, social housing, addiction services, and mental health services for vulnerable populations in St. Thomas.
- Worried that we need to do more to become a more inclusive city.
- Time to start a multicultural day in the park event

Crime Rates Are Up:

- Safety concerns in the downtown area, including crime affecting business owners.
- People do not feel safe walking outdoors in downtown area, particularly at night.

Lack of Community Engagement:

- Concerns that we do not fully value and utilize the skills and abilities of community members in a positive manner.
- Emphasized the importance of protecting individual rights and their ability to engage and influence the future.
- Concerned that people do not know about community meetings – they should be better advertised to ensure broader participation.
 - Citizens should be allowed to speak and contribute at Council meetings.
 - Ensure all communication is transparent.
 - What Councillor do I go to if I have issues? This is not clear or transparent.
 - Need a better website where we can engage and be communicated with; education hubs; feedback hubs, etc.

Environmental Protection:

- Advocate for better utilization of outdoor green spaces for recreation, including adult activities, and suggests breaking down age-related segregation.
- Concern about too much agriculture land being taken over - it will change the community from having that small town agriculture feel, with family farms.
- Concerns about urbanization and its potential impact on the community's agricultural heritage and family farms.
- Some participants expressed concerns that we should not gobble up smaller towns – protect the city's character and prevent urban sprawl.
- Concerned about shadow impact and the importance of minimizing it. Create bylaws to protect our urban and rural environments.
- We need to get smarter with our infrastructure to ensure we are ready for any disasters in our community i.e., roads and sewers are up-to-date.

General and Heritage Infrastructure:

- Concerns that we have revitalization - and yet we have buildings that are falling down - and people who don't know where to sleep.
- Some express frustration over the contradiction between revitalization efforts and the persistence of dilapidated buildings and homelessness.

Long-Term Care and Healthcare

- Concern that our community is aging, and our infrastructure will not support growth of older people. Wait list for LTC home in St. Thomas.
- Aging at home is also complicated as it is hard to access home healthcare services. There is a shortage of PSW's.
- Concern that we do not have enough physicians, including specialists, to meet the needs of our current and growing populations.

- Concern that paramedic services are being stretched in St. Thomas and will get worse with growth. City needs to invest in these critical services.

Freedom and Privacy

- Concerns that the City must continue to protect the rights and freedoms of all St. Thomas citizens. Ensure that the City does not go backwards into lockdown situations again.
- Vaccination decisions should be the choice of individuals.
- It is important that there is transparent communication about any significant changes that are happening in St. Thomas and that there are opportunities for residents to engage and have a say in important decisions impact the city.
- CCTV cameras are a worry as they could violate our privacy.

Top Priorities

Strategic Planning for Positive City Growth and Urban Development and Growth

- We need an integrated, coordinated City plan to proactively manage the growth and ensure we achieve our goals and vision for the City.
- Thoughtful, strategic, innovative, and integrated urban planning.
- Conduct thorough, thoughtful and balanced long-term growth and infrastructure planning for St. Thomas, with extensive public engagement and dialogue.
- Create balanced and inclusive communities across the city.
- Efficiently and effectively use our resources in innovative ways to create state-of-the-art solutions that will affect real and lasting change.
- Explore innovative planning approaches to address urban growth and development challenges.

Community Safety

- Expand our policing and emergency services capacity.
- Place priority on funding our police to ensure the community is safe and secure and to assist in managing the complex issues facing our city.
- Advocate to the Justice System to ensure that dangerous offenders are not released.

Downtown Revitalization

- Bring back the Downtown. Thriving Talbot Street.
- Revitalize and beautify the downtown, the hub of the city.

Manage and Renew our Infrastructure

- Ensure our city is well-maintained and beautiful; care for the aesthetics of the city; keep it clean, painted, cared for, etc.
- Maintain and upgrade the roads and infrastructure.
- Arch on Talbot of our buildings is beautiful but it's in disrepair - hold property owners responsible.
- Calls for the restoration of architectural and heritage elements and suggests property owners should be accountable for maintenance.
- Consider heritage property tax relief.

Homelessness and Social Issues

- We must end homelessness.
- Significantly improve and expand social services for homelessness, including wraparound and supportive services to keep homeless successfully housed and sheltered.
- Expand services to address mental health and addictions issues.

Housing

- Develop an Affordable Housing strategy, that includes developing housing stock across the continuum, from emergency shelters to transitional and social housing, to affordable rental housing to affordable home ownership to market rental housing and market home ownership.
- Expand housing capacity along the continuum.
- Invest in and expand affordable Housing and different types of housing, such as multi-family, four and six plexes, co-op housing, with considerations in north end.
 - Build housing for future growth in the city, from VW and the Fertilizer plan, while minimizing environmental impacts.

Inclusive Community

- Protect the privacy and freedom of individuals and respect the diversity of individuals needs.
- Help newcomers to feel welcome and to successfully integrate into the community.
- Build an EDI plan that will ensure St. Thomas is an equitable and inclusive City that values the needs of all St. Thomas residents. Be good neighbours.

Transit and Mobility

- Improve the transit system and services within St. Thomas and connected to surrounding areas.
- Expand transit within the City and between St. Thomas and London. It is critical for our vulnerable residents to be able to travel safely and cost-effectively to London for appointments, health services, shopping, etc. Transit is also important for people who are travelling across St. Thomas and to London for jobs. It is also important for College and University students. We expect that transit to the new plants will also be important within the City. Transit also benefits the environment.
- Invest in bike lanes and other forms of active transportation; add UBER services to the City.
- Connect the City trails and paths.
- Paths should have exercise equipment pods - with instructions along the paths.

Communication

- Improve St. Thomas communication, engagement, and collaboration processes. (i.e., not aware of Mayor's weekly updates, this meeting announcement, customer service hotline, etc.)
- Enhance the City's communication effectiveness, transparency and impact with all residents and communities.

Amenities and Services

- Expand physician recruitment.
- Expand recreation, cultural, tourism and engaging spaces and programming.
 - Improve recreation facilities, such as adding an indoor pool and more services for seniors and youth.
 - Build a community centre, with an indoor pool.
 - Expand library locations and consider adding a Public Arts Centre.
 - Use the Horton Market capacity to its fullest.
 - Expand usage of the elevator park.

Vision for St. Thomas

- A city with diversified housing along the continuum.
- A compassionate and caring community.
- A destination city that people want to visit or move to.
- A growing city – we have everything we need within the City of St. Thomas i.e., great restaurants, schools, hospital, amenities, infrastructure, etc.
- A neighbourly and friendly city.
- A safe and welcoming city.
- A walkable city that is easy to get around.
- A well-planned city that meets everyone's needs.
- Affordable housing and transportation for all.
- All the city's problems are solved.
- An accessible and easy to get around city.
- An economic engine in the province of Ontario.
- An inclusive city.
- Banana belt - 25% less snow....20 minutes to the beach, 2 hours to Detroit, 2 hours to Toronto.... sweet spot.
- Build the community i.e., the Horton Market.
- Care about sustaining and growing small businesses, while welcoming entrepreneurs and larger businesses into the community.
- Cars are allowed and encouraged.
- Community centre, with a pool and great programs and services.
- Decide how fast we want to grow or if we want to grow.
- Developers are required to offer diverse forms of housing in new developments.
- Enough physicians for all residents.
- Everyone feels comfortable living in St. Thomas.
- Everyone will have access to technology and know how to use it.
- Everything is in walking distance. More trails.
- Expand our university and colleges footprint in the City.
- Expand the library and culture in the City.
- Freedom; no digital currency or digital id for residents.
- Growing to accommodate young families.
- Heritage properties are maintained and celebrated.
- Housing for everyone.
- Just stay as it is.
- More diverse, good mix of all groups and ages.
- More festivals and cultural events to unite people.
- Multi-cultural, inclusive city where we can enjoy each other. Where we can leave peacefully together.
- New, improved shelter for animals.

- People have what they need to do well / thrive.
- People want to live here, stay here, move here, invite guests here.
- Recreation services and programs exist that meet the diverse needs of our citizens.
- Residents will not be controlled or limited in where they can go.
- Revitalized downtown where people want to go.
- Rich artisan community – creative community.
- Safe and clean community
- Safe and secure city; minimal crime.
- Small town feeling but have what the city offers.
- Small town feeling, with big city amenities.
- Strong volunteerism – we care about people and helping everyone live a good life.
- The city attracts and keeps younger people.
- The city will have a really good communication strategy.
- The public will be actively engaged, informed and aware.
- There will be no 15-minute city – we can go anywhere we want in the City. We will not be controlled, monitored, or limited.
- Transit services and accessibility to transit will be improved.
- Transit takes us where we need to go.
- Vibrant downtown.
- We are an example for other cities to follow.
- We are connected, caring, and we belong.
- We are learning from one another.
- We build bridges to include multi-cultural diversity of people; not a them versus us community.
- Zero homelessness.

Next Steps:

Following receipt by Council, this Town Hall summary information will be shared on the City’s website and with those who attended a Town Hall meeting and provided staff with their email address; the intention of which is to remain transparent and engaged with residents throughout the process.

At the time of this report, all community and stakeholder engagement activities have concluded, with the data being analyzed and evaluated by Climb Consulting and the Strategic Plan Steering Committee. A more fulsome update on the full scope of community engagement activities will be included in an upcoming report to Council alongside a draft/working strategic plan document. Following the development of the draft plan, further engagement activities will take place prior to finalizing and receiving Council endorsement on the refreshed plan in early 2024.

Respectfully,

Taylor Mooney

Taylor Mooney, Strategic Initiatives Manager

Approved by:

Janice Antone

City Manager