



Economic Resiliency Task Force
Wednesday, May 26, 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

Employment Representative:

Bill Pigram, Manager, Community Employment Choices

Workforce Development Representative:

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

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

Regrets:

Michael Di Lullo, CAO, Middlesex Centre
Gudrun Haas Director Business, Armatec Survivability (on behalf Karl Pfister, President, Armatec Survivability)

1. Welcome

Cathy welcomed everyone and thanked them for their time. An introduction was provided for special guest, Bill Rayburn, CAO - Middlesex County.

2. Approval of the Minutes of the April 2021 Meeting

Minutes of the meeting were circulated to the Task Force Members for review immediately following the April meeting

Motion to approve the minutes – Demetri Makrakos; 2nd by Kelly Elliott; carried

3. County Update

- Immediately following the April meeting and lockdown announcement, the County developed a 5 minute; 5 day; 5 question survey for local business regarding the one year impacts of COVID-19. 130 responses were received. This information was summarized and an infographic report of the survey findings was shared with County Council, local Members of Parliament, the Western Ontario Wardens' Caucus, South Central Ontario Region, and the Premier. The survey report was also shared publicly.
- Cathy was engaged in an interview with MyFM on the survey results.
https://www.strathroytoday.ca/2021/04/29/results-for-5-5-5-covid-19-business-survey-are-in/?fbclid=IwAR0zzZTrluQfbSNgZPGQgilxFxbgNDgNSYnD9EsmGQjorwXkJHQ50Ar13zE#.YI_jduXSrY8.facebook
- Cara was engaged in an interview with The London Free Press on the survey results
<https://lfpres.com/news/local-news/many-middlesex-firms-took-revenue-hit-in-covids-first-year-survey>
- The County's tourism sponsorship program is in full swing and applications have started to come in. Details are available at [Spring Newsletter 2021 | Middlesex Economic Development \(investinmiddlesex.ca\)](https://investinmiddlesex.ca)
- There has been a steady stream of new investment inquiries in the County over the past month. County and lower tier economic development offices are working together on a number of large investments.
- The County has approved another round of sponsorship funding for the CFDC to continue offering small business workshops. The topic of the June workshop is Developing Business Resilience. Registration is FREE and can be access at <https://cfmiddlesex.ca/events-calendar/developing-resilience-overcoming-the-barriers-and-challenges-to-becoming-resilient/>

Vaccine Rollout (Bill Rayburn)

- Immediately following the April meeting, the Warden and Mayor Ed Holder were able to champion for the rollout of vaccines to a number of pharmacies throughout the City and County.
- After much advocacy, and with the input of the Task Force and results of the business impact survey, the County has been successful in securing 1000 initial doses of the COVID-19 vaccine for community distribution
- The vaccine are being provided through a direct channel to the County and will be administered by MLEMS to hard-to-reach populations and large employers in Middlesex and London.
- Cara's office and the LEDC and other workforce stakeholders worked together last week to provide a list of businesses to the Premier's office for consideration for this, and subsequent roll-outs
<https://london.ctvnews.ca/middlesex-county-led-vaccine-acquisition-targets-hard-to-reach-residents-1.5441859>
- Thanks to the efforts of Kelly Elliott and the team at Thames Centre, a pop-up vaccination clinic is being held in the community this week. All 400 appointments were booked in 24 hours; with the vast majority being booked in the first few hours through local promotions.

- It is expected that if the above-noted are successful; this will set the ground for further pop-up clinics both at the community and workplace level
- Sincere thanks expressed to the Task Force stakeholders for their work in providing the information to support these efforts

4. Roundtable Discussion re: Current State (Provincial Re-opening Plan)

Demetri Makrakos

- Secured Federal funding for several downtown patios however, at present – no restaurants can take-over the spaces due to provincial restrictions on outdoor dining. The patios have already been delayed however, it is expected that they will be delivered in the next 1-2 weeks. While the restaurants cannot officially use the spaces, the municipality could allow them to be used for “recreational use”. Municipal by-laws may need to be re-written to allow for longer patio seasons and extended uses. This is a gap in the alignment of Federal dollars being allocated to tourism supports that cannot be effectively utilized due to provincial restrictions on business operations
- Investment attraction is very strong. Working with the County on a few inquiries and several direct inquiries as well. As new investments are coming forward, the municipality must consider revisiting existing businesses in the community to ensure that their expansion needs can be accommodated before industrial land becomes unattainable due to the increasing market demand.
- The newly expanded Community Improvement Plan of the municipality is already proving itself to be a valuable tool in attracting investment to the County
- The weekend market is operational in Downtown Strathroy. Gaps between what is allowable under the market guidelines and what is allowable for the small business community that occupies the same space.

Kelly Elliott

- As noted, the pop up vaccination clinic to take place in Thames Centre has taken shape and by all accounts, will prove to be a successful model for other communities and MLHU to emulate
- Worked with OFA and MPP Yurek to arrange appointments for a group of Middlesex based farm workers who needed to be vaccinated; unfortunately had to arrange the appointments in a neighbouring community
- Putting together community and business partners for a “Tour Thames Centre” project; encouraging people to shop and visit locations in the area. Hoping to have the project sponsored through the County’s new tourism program.
- Idea do the Farm-gate sign program; could also be eligible for County funding through the new tourism sponsorship program

Kathy Manness

- Small businesses expressing disappointment, frustration and confusion over provincial guidelines which significantly hinder their operations.
- i.e. people can now be outside in groups of 5 playing a pick up game of basketball but it is considered unsafe for them to have a single person inside their retail store masked.

- At the same time, the market can operate retail and food sales under a tent on the downtown street but, businesses are being told that they cannot do the same on their own property
- so much money has been spent on PPE and safety procedures only for these businesses to be told that even that is not enough and they are unable to operate under the guidelines the province previously set out for them to follow
 - Personal services and restaurants continue to feel that they have been unfairly targeted; along with small retailers who are not to blame for the spread of COVID-19
 - Working on a program that will allow employers a supply of rapid test kits for staff. Target is businesses with less than 150 employees. Some feel this support is coming too late and is somewhat irrelevant as businesses have been so restricted and vaccinations are on the rise
 - Small businesses are feeling like their voices are not loud enough to be heard and they need a greater collective message to be delivered on their behalf
 - The SDCC is moving their offices into Town Hall temporarily while they await a more permanent home

Kurtis Smith

- Questions about employers desire to use rapid test kits once they are back in operation as false or real positive cases would further limit their businesses which have already been so hard hit
- Emphasis on municipalities and local police services in how they write, interpret, and impose by-laws as per the provincial guidelines. (education versus enforcement)

Bill Pigram

- Abundance of job opportunities available; if people want to work – there is a job for them
- CERB still impacting people's willingness to return to work
- Simply not enough people available to take the positions offered
- Finding job candidates less and less prepared to work; ie. people placed in landscaping positions quitting after a day or two of work due to the physical demands of the job

Debra Mountenay

- Shared a job demand report showing that there were more job positing for Middlesex County businesses in the month of April 2021 than any other time since pre-pandemic (Dec. 2019)
- The majority of jobs available are permanent full-time

Todd Copeland

- CFDC Middlesex has just received notice that they will be able to access another pool of Federal relief financing ; must be allocated by end of June 2021.
- Currently has a pipeline of \$1 million dollar in applications for financing: only 20% of which could be consider Recovery needs; 80% of requests are related to expansion plans and can be served through the office's new Edge Fund
 - <https://cfmiddlesex.ca/edge-fund/>

- The office is inviting all community leaders and Task Force members to attend their AGM in June
<https://events.r20.constantcontact.com/register/eventReg?oeidk=a07ehzkwcorbdf9b232&oseq=&c=&ch>

Joanne Fuller

- Temporary Foreign Worker program is still an issue; very complicated process to get workers in place; too many levels of government involved
- Some farmers have changed what they are planting this year simply to avoid dealing with more labour intense crops. This will impact local supply chains
- Small businesses need to be treated more fairly; the rural economy cannot be sustained without them
- Working behind the scenes with the Premier's office regarding vaccination needs in agriculture
- Worked with Cara putting together the list of food production businesses that could be considered for the on-site vaccination clinics
- OFA has launched a new "Home Grown" campaign aimed at preserving farmland for agricultural production.

5. Next Steps

- Amplify the Small Business Voice by championing messages from the CFIB and OCC; speak to LCC about alignment of local messages.
- Cara to speak to BellMedia about the potential for a story on London & Area Works about Middlesex County employment offerings and how it is a opportune time to find local employment
- Re-emphasize the importance of the implementation of CIPs throughout the County and how these can be used a tool to continue to spawn investment and expansion coming out of COVID-19
- Help promote available resources – new Ontario Travel and Tourism Grant; Middlesex Tourism Sponsorship Program; Middlesex Edge Fund and RRF available through the CFDC; workshops and Women's Caucus initiatives
- Work with Bill Rayburn and County Council regarding the best way to keep taxation low to spawn recovery as we exit the pandemic; and how to communicate this

6. Meeting Schedule & Adjournment

- It was decided through consensus that another meeting will be held as we are able to move into Step 3 of the Province's Reopening Plan
- Next Meeting: TBD - Cara will provide details
- The meeting adjourned at 11:50 a.m.