Long road, but drive is there
Prosperity group sees success in first steps toward lofty goals

DANIELLE WONG
The Hamilton Spectator

(Nov 28, 2009)

The vision is an ambitious one.
And those who subscribe to it would not have it any other way.

The Jobs Prosperity Collaborative (JPC) set out to make Hamilton "the best city in Canada to raise a child, promote innovation, engage citizens and provide diverse economic opportunities."

It's a challenge, but these goals are achievable, says JPC chair Mark Chamberlain.

"I don't believe if you're trying to land on the moon you should be trying to land halfway there," Chamberlain said. "We (as a city) are small enough to get our arms around it and large enough to make a big difference."

The mandate to bring Hamilton's different sectors together to improve the city through job creation and retention was set out in 2008, after the Hamilton Civic Coalition spent a couple of years honing its focus, Chamberlain said.

When it changed its name early last year, the JPC was born.

And on Monday, this collaborative of about 80 community, business and municipal government leaders will see its coming-out party at a free sold-out event at the Hamilton Place Theatre.

The night will feature guest speaker author Bill Strickland, who witnessed the revitalization of a struggling Pittsburgh after the decline of its steel industry.

Chamberlain is hopeful the event will engage the local community with JPC's mandate.

"There's not one big solution," said Chamberlain, who is the president and CEO of commercialization firm Trivaris Ltd. "There's a multitude of many small incremental solutions."

In fact, outside of its core members, the JPC has about 150 Hamiltonians involved in subcommittees that reflect this multi-faceted approach.

The JPC operates on seven priority groups: innovation and learning, Hamilton's image, quality of life, immigration, commercial land and infrastructure, supportive planning process and economic portfolio.

David Adames, who co-leads the "image" subgroup, said his team's major focus so far has been engaging the community to change its view of the city.

"We're very modest. I think we can be more boastful sometimes," said Adames, who is Tourism Hamilton's executive director.

His co-leader, Grace Diffey, agreed.

"I don't think it's a surprise ... that one of Hamilton's traditional problems is its image outside of the city," said Diffey, who is the vice-president of community relations for the Hamilton Community Foundation.

"We're working to get people engaged to help them really realize the wonderful assets that are here."

Adames said they plan to launch a self-image campaign in spring 2010, noting an enhanced JPC website with a community engagement tool will be available Monday.

Cheryl Jensen, who co-leads the "immigration" priority group, said it expects to release a general awareness paper on the city's immigration statistics by the end of January.

"We are a rich culture here in the city.... And we know that ... immigration is going to be the key for our skills and job prosperity for the next couple of decades," said Jensen, who is Mohawk College's vice-president academic.

Asked whether the collaborative's mandate was obtainable, Jensen said: "I compare it to that saying that you need to plant some trees so that the future generation can enjoy the shade."

Last year, the collaborative formed an economic advisory committee to city council and received a $100,000 grant from the city earlier this year.
This year, the JPC has a $520,000 budget, which includes donations and funds from the province and the city.

Most of its plans are in the early stages, but the JPC's biggest achievement so far is "aligning a very broad sector around seven areas and building goals," Chamberlain said.

In the future, the community can expect to see the JPC involved with the Pan Am Games from a prosperity agenda, he said.

For Don Jaffray, who leads the JPC "quality of life" priority group, the collaborative has already achieved a lot by bringing community leaders together.

"We're conveying messages and influencing choices that are made both in business, government and community services," said Jaffray, executive director of the Social Planning and Research Council of Hamilton.

The JPC's vision is obtainable, he said.

"I get to work with quite a few people who are familiar with that statement," Jaffray said.

"And those people are working to make Hamilton the best place to raise a child. We see a lot of progress."

dawong@thespec.com

905-526-2468