

HORTON TOWNSHIP

RURAL LIVING WITHIN URBAN REACH



Horton Township Community-Based Economic Development Plan

**Report on the
Business Owners' Focus Group
Held April 22, 2017**

Introduction

In February 2017 the Municipal Council of Horton Township voted in favour of developing a new community-based economic development plan for the Township. As one of several first steps in this process, a ninety-minute-long “business breakfast”/focus group was held at the Horton Community Hall on the morning of Friday, April 22, 2017. This invitation-based event was open to local business owners and was intended to identify economic development opportunities and challenges facing the Township from their business-oriented perspectives. The focus group was facilitated by Chris Fullerton, an Associate Professor in the Department of Geography & Tourism Studies at Brock University. Also in attendance were Chris Drost and Avis Price from Grant Writing Solutions, the two individuals who will be authoring the Township’s community-based economic development plan, and Horton Township’s CAO, Sue Klatt.

List of Questions:

The following ten questions were asked over the course of the focus group session. Despite the limited time available to get through all of the questions, a considerable amount of input was provided by the participants.

- How would you describe Horton to someone who has never been here?
- What are Horton’s strengths/assets as a place to live?
- What are Horton’s weaknesses as a place to live?
- What are Horton’s strengths/assets as a place to do business?
- What are Horton’s weaknesses as a place to do business?
- What changes might improve the business climate?
- One thing Horton does not have is a downtown core. Is this an issue?
- What are the most logical targets to include in the Economic Development Plan for Horton?
- Should Horton try to attract more residents?

Presented on the following pages is a synopsis of the responses, as well as the actual comments that were provided by the participants and recorded during the focus group session.

Question #1: How would you describe Horton to someone who has never been here?

Responses to the question, which was meant to “break the ice” with the group, generally related to the rural character and charm of the Township:

- On the Canadian Shield
 - Nearby wilderness
 - Rural
 - Quiet
 - Friendly
-

Question #2: What are Horton’s strengths/assets as a place to live?

Similar to the first question, it was clear that most participants thought quite highly of the Township and the benefits of living there:

- Beauty
 - Safe
 - Affordable
 - Reasonable proximity to city
 - Sport fishing/hunting
 - Recreation Centre
 - Pet friendly
-

Question #3: What are Horton’s weaknesses as a place to live?

As in many other rural communities, the availability and quality of some utilities were among the chief concerns among the focus group participants:

- Isolation for some people
 - Transportation for seniors
 - Hydro costs
 - Broadband limitations
 - Lack of cell service, especially along the Ottawa River
-

Question #4: What are Horton's strengths/assets as a place to do business?

The ease and cost of doing business in the Township were highlighted as local assets in response to this question. So, too, was the accessibility to places outside Horton that is provided by transportation infrastructure in the area.

- Approachable administration at the Township
 - Common sense
 - Easy to do business in terms of process for development
 - Low taxes
 - Access to highway #17
 - Easy to get around
 - Bridge to Quebec (should be promoted)
 - Many are born into business here--generational
-

Question #5: What are Horton's weaknesses as a place to do business?

As with Question #3, utilities loomed large in the responses to this question. Also mentioned were planning regulations and land use issues.

- Three-phase power supply is limited
 - Broadband service is limited
 - Many services are now "on line" and it is difficult to file HST (example) on-line when service is not available – very frustrating
 - Telephone delivery service has not been updated in decades. Cannot get high-speed tied to phone lines.
 - Along the Ottawa River some people have to have a Canada cell phone as calls jump across the river through Quebec
 - Delays in 911 service
 - Provincial regulations do not always fit this rural area but have to be followed
 - With proximity of Hwy 17 there are more eyes watching what businesses are doing (e.g. farmers spraying crops)
-

Question #6: What changes might improve the business climate?

Here, most of the participants' responses fell within one of three categories: the need for better and more frequent interaction among local businesses; improvements to the land use planning process; and the four-laning of Highway 17 through Horton Township.

- Improved networking opportunities between business owners in this rural area
 - A platform for Horton business owners to communicate would be helpful (even if it is on-line)
 - Township has a member on Renfrew Chamber and so do some businesses. Would be good if more business owners were on the Chamber.
 - Problem – mailing addresses are all Renfrew so all businesses in Horton get lumped together making it difficult for the Township to separate for promotion
 - Sue Klatt asked the question whether the Horton businesses could be on the Township website. Suggestion to use a hashtag for Horton businesses to be identified and have a business page on the website.
 - Horton Township should have more control. Renfrew County controls much of everything.
 - Zoning – Horton is receptive to zoning changes but the County puts up roadblocks making it expensive to proceed.
 - Need more local representation to provide input to policy statements, planning and committees
 - Could the Township lobby for more representation?
 - There is a big disconnect with regulations coming out of Toronto.
 - Feeling that the powers that be in Toronto do not know “who we are”
 - Sue Klatt noted that they are now part of the Rural Mayors Forum which goes to AMO now with one voice
 - Hwy 17 has increased the number of residents. With more residents, more business will be attracted so this is a good approach
 - Cannot attract people saying #17 will be 4 lanes soon as there is no information on the proposed timeline for expansion
 - Already having 4 lanes on Hwy #17, 20 minutes away has made Horton more desirable for those willing to commute
 - Wayfinding signage restrictions on highways is an issue
 - Cheaper tax base but still a bit far out for some
 - For people coming from Algonquin Park and Petawawa the two-lane highway #17 is an issue
 - Need to lobby for 4 lanes on highway #17 and request a timeline
 - Dealing with Hydro One is a huge issue. Rates are high and service is an issue. Business owners are still paying towards debt retirement.
-

Question #7: One thing Horton does not have is a downtown core. Is this an issue?

The Township not having a defined downtown core did not seem to be a major issue of concern among the business owners participating in the focus group. It was noted that Renfrew has one, and that the land around the future Highway 417 interchange at Castleford Road may be the best place for any sort of commercial development in Horton Township.

- There already is a downtown in Renfrew
 - At least 50% of the Town of Renfrew businesses are already owned by Horton residents
 - Zoning would be difficult
 - The downtown core model is difficult to sustain across the province as people shop on-line and small stores cannot offer price points to be competitive with box stores
 - #17 interchange is promised. It may be the place where a cluster of businesses develops in the future.
 - Better to develop and promote a scenic loop or horseshoe through Horton instead of trying to create a downtown core. (e.g. Rural Route) Focus it on beauty and historical features.
 - Speed restrictions on River Road are so bad that some people do not take that road any longer. Excessive restrictions have changed the flow.
 - Others maintain that traffic on River Road is still busy
-

Question #8: What are the most logical targets to include in the Economic Development Plan for Horton?

Tourism-related development dominated the discussion here; however, participants were also quick to share their feelings that land use planning issues (such as, for example, a slow decision-making process or zoning restrictions) must be dealt with as part of the effort to encourage new economic development activities within the Township.

- Tourism (also because of the lower costs for development compared to manufacturing, industrial waste very expensive to dispose of in this rural community. Heavy trucks cause road issues)
- With tourism, the infrastructure can handle it.
- Agri-tourism – “Naturally cultivated” – apples etc. is an opportunity
- Nature-focused economic development
- There are opportunities for arts and cultural related businesses
- Don’t have heavy power lines for manufacturing.
- Internet businesses
- Low carbon footprint businesses
- Loss of manufacturing=loss of disposable income
- Weakness – difficult to obtain financing.
- Province does not encourage local growth

- Need a change in attitude from the bottom up
 - Interchange is critical for attracting commercial activity (hotels/restaurants etc.)
 - Zoning must be flexible
 - Downtowns are dying – if you don't have the population you cannot support retail
 - Security deposits are a killer for small business
 - Horton needs to be more competitive than surrounding townships
 - Must be good stewards of land and check environmental impacts
-

Question #9: Should Horton try to attract more residents?

In considering this last question most participants agreed that there is great potential for the Township to achieve economic development through population growth, especially because of the area's rural character and charm.

- Horton's best approach to improve economic development is to attract new residents
- Horton is in good shape for expanding the number of residents
- Horton could be a draw for residents because of the lifestyle it offers
- Need to bring in people from the outside to have growth. Cannot just send all the money out of the township or just recycle money within.
- Every new resident adds to local spending, a snowball effect
- Bring artisans, niche businesses into Horton
- Twenty-five new building permits and many requests for severances last year but there has been some stalling at the County level
- Promote the benefits of the bridge to Quebec