

Chamber accepts city budget reality

CLAIRE RYAN & JIM QUINN COMMENTARY



Restaurants around Market Square line the boardwalk. PHOTO: TOPHER SEGUIN/TELEGRAPH-JOURNAL ARCHIVE

The Saint John Chamber wishes to congratulate the Mayor and Council of Saint John for passing a budget that maintains the property tax rate while letting residents know what challenges the city is facing going forward.

We recognize the difficulty the city faced this year in achieving this balance with the property assessment freeze imposed by the province for this year and next, the reduction in the unconditional grant from the province and limits on the municipal capacity to raise funds.

We recognize that tough decisions had to be made, but they were taken to ensure the city balanced its budget as required by provincial legislation. These decisions have allowed the municipality to provide services at a cost that does not deter people and business from wanting to live or do business here.

We all want to see the highest quality services available in our city, as these are key elements in attracting new residents, jobs and activity. But they must be at a cost we can afford.

As our major city, Saint John needs to serve as an anchor for the region. It is the destination that attracts tourists, immigrants and businesses and must be seen as a positive, prosperous location to want to live, work and visit. To achieve this, the services and amenities available must meet our needs and expectations.

Municipal governments are the closest to the people and have the greatest impact on how we live our daily lives. As the city moves forward with its long-range plan to tackle our financial situation, we would like to see the municipal administration do a public review of our key municipal services as they are doing with the ongoing transportation review. This will help business and the general public to better understand how these budget changes will affect key services.

The desire expressed by the city to reduce the tax rate is a worthwhile objective, but one that must be analyzed and implemented in such a manner that the public can understand the impact on services, and not just on the tax rate. We must not lose sight of our residents' desire to have services at a certain level and for business to be in a competitive tax regime.

Keeping the public informed on the rationale for budget changes and spending decisions will lead to an involved electorate and increased level of participation in the tough decisions ahead.

At the Chamber, our members strongly believe in Saint John and its potential. They are building their businesses and are contributing to our community every day. City Council is to be saluted for the work it is doing to manage the city finances, as we continue to build a more positive climate for businesses that are looking to establish or grow their operations here.

Claire Ryan and Jim Quinn are chair and vice-chair of the Saint John Region Chamber of Commerce.