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## Panel urges co-operation

### ECONOMY

Posted By NATHAN TAYLOR, THE PACKET AND TIMES

Posted 6 hours ago

There was a call for a broad, co-operative and environmental approach to getting the community through the recession during a forum last night at the Best Western Mariposa Inn and Conference Centre.

The Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) hosted the forum, called Let's Talk Solutions: A Community Response to the Economic Crisis. The intent was to address three key concerns: the impact of the recession, the resources that are in the community, and what's needed from business, government and labour to stimulate the economy.

Despite the fact little more than a dozen people attended, the two-hour discussion was lively.

Linda McDowell, president of the Orillia, Muskoka and District Labour Council, was one of five panellists at the forum. She began by noting the "massive numbers of people" who have lost jobs, referring to the closures of Otaco and Canada Wood and the downsizing of other local businesses.

While this area has food banks, numerous charities, a soup kitchen and other social services, "we need a lot more," McDowell said, adding governments need to re-examine the employment insurance and welfare systems and make them less restrictive.

Coun. Don Evans, executive director of the Sharing Place Food Bank, was another panel-list. He noted the food bank has seen a 30% increase in clients in the past year.

Orillia needs to be viewed as a small community while looking for a solution to the crisis, he said, adding the

government must "invest creativity, thought" and substantial funding.

Dan Kerr, manager of events and development with the Downtown Orillia Management Board, highlighted the difficulties faced by downtown businesses. At a time like this, he suggested, people are buying according to price, not quality or service. And, when someone heads across town to pay less for one item at a big-box store, it can lead to even less business in the downtown core in future, he said.

Retail trade is the largest single sector, business-wise, in Orillia : "It's going to hit the downtown as hard, if not harder," than other areas of the city, Kerr said.

Mary O'Farrell-Bowers, dean of community studies with the Orillia campus of Georgian College, said when the economy is poor, the college's enrolment goes up -- "good news for Georgian; bad news for individuals."

Georgian offers the "second career initiative" and is receiving government funding to offer those opportunities to those who have lost jobs during these hard times.

Rounding out the panel was Coun. Joe Fecht, who noted, "for Orillia, there has been a huge impact." Construction, tourism, manufacturing and other job losses have all been felt in the city. He listed some of the income support programs, but said "all of these are totally inadequate to live on for any period of time."

Minimum wage is too low; universal daycare isn't in place; there's not enough affordable housing. He acknowledged the need for public transportation, but added it is "not affordable without significant revenue from the federal government."

All the different voices did relate one common message: Unity -- between residents, businesses, the various sectors and all levels of government -- is essential.

"We need an increased willingness of people to work together," O'Farrell-Bowers said.

Richard Banigan, the former federal Simcoe North NDP candidate, suggested "micro grants" to help people start businesses.

Banigan also was in support of taxes, especially on those who can afford it most.

Simcoe North MP Bruce Stanton said the federal government is "looking at the kind of interventions that are going to get us back on track," including EI reform, infrastructure funding and GST cuts.

He also encouraged businesses to think globally as well as locally.

Mark Hirstwood, a steward with OPSEU Local 330, talked about the economic opportunities of alternative and renewable energy. The installation of wind turbines throughout the Great Lakes could create thousands of jobs, he noted.

Orillia resident Mike McMurter suggested a community forum, just like last night's, was a big part of the solution. He referred to the city's economic development committee -- made up of council representatives and a few "cherry-picked" business owners -- as not being an adequate representation of the city.

The city should consider using forums like last night's more often for its own decision making, McMurter said.

OPSEU will take the feedback and see how it can be put into action in communities.

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