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Summit held to generate solutions to recession

Posted By BECKY DAY

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A Niagara Community Summit sponsored by the Ontario Public Service Employees Union (OPSEU) was held at the Nick Basciano Centre in Thorold on June 24 to generate solutions to the economic downturn. On the panel were Walter Sendzick of the St. Catharines-Thorold Chamber of Commerce, TSS student Laura Skellet, Thorold Councillor Shawn Wilson, President of the Niagara Falls and district labour council Claude Sonier, Dan Patterson-President of Niagara College and community advocate Gracia Janes.

"With the exception of the Greater Windsor area, the economic downturn has kicked the Niagara region with more force than any other part of the province," said organizer Bruce Harper. "We all know the story -- economic recession, job losses, manufacturing plants closing, social service agencies unable to cope with the increased number of clients."

"We're going to come out of this a lot stronger," said Walter Sendzick. "I think we've got the plans in place."

"I look at Niagara as having a dark cloud over it," said a not so optimistic Gracia Janes, "People are really going to have to educate themselves ...We're all going to have to work a lot harder."

"I think the black cloud has lifted," said Sendzick. "I firmly believe that there's a ray of sunshine shining down on Niagara". "I hope we see this as an opportunity to reposition ourselves in the very tough market place," said Dan Patterson noting a 20 percent increase in attendance at Niagara College over the last two years.

When asked by moderator Steve Stunt what the region could do to keep youth in Niagara, the panel agreed that providing job opportunities were number one.

"We've got to start supporting the Niagara region," said Claude Sonier. "We've got to support each other... That's not

protectionism, it's survivalism.”

Next, the panel debated the idea of One Niagara and whether it would help the region economically. Janes liked the idea and Sendzick cited an example where it has already worked- St. Catharines. “I don't think amalgamation works. I think we are already one Niagara,” Shawn Wilson said.


The panel were then asked to look through a crystal ball to the next five years. They expressed a need for a regional transit system and for municipalities to work closely together.

“I hope we see that our existing strengths... are strong and vibrant and adjust to some of the challenges,” Patterson said.

He also envisioned Niagara as a destination of choice with stronger leadership, one voice, benchmarking and for Niagara to be in a better position to plan and coordinate our activities. “This is jobs... This is a generational change,” said Sendzick, listing the many projects the region is undertaking (the 406 extension, a state of the art hospital, convention centre, performing arts centre, wine route, port land development in Thorold, etc...) “I don't think there is anyone in this room that can put up their hand and say that this amount of money has been spent on infrastructure in St. Catharines in their lifetime...I think we're heading in the right direction and I think the future looks very bright for Niagara”.

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OPSEU will compile the community based solutions and bring the information forward to Queens Park. They plan to sponsor 11 summits across the province.

“It's important to continue the process,” said Judy Robertson, Local OPSEU 214 President. “You need to have players. Another group on the panel maybe needs to take some ownership.”

“On the one hand, the event brings together representatives from business, labour, education, municipal government, community services, and student youth groups to have a frank discussion not simply about how we got into this mess, but more importantly, how we can get out of it,” Harper said.

“This is about our shared Niagara community and how we can work together to make it stronger. The goal is to convince the provincial government to essentially duplicate the community summit format at the “big stage” level, meaning host a Provincial [Summit...to](#) talk about solutions.”

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