

Memorandum

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TO: Members of Council
FROM: Dana Earle, Deputy City Clerk
DATE: Friday, October 16, 2020
SUBJECT: **Additional Information 2**

Committee of the Whole – October 19, 2020

COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE

Report No. R 106/2020 (Development & Emergency Services - Realty Services) Victoriaville
Centre Options Analysis– Reimagine Victoriaville

1. Memorandum from Dr. Ernie Epp, Professor Emeritus of History - Lakehead University dated October 16, 2020 relative to the above noted, for information.

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As you consider the future of Victoriaville Centre, may I offer a few thoughts? The recommendation of the Urban Systems partnership to adopt option four--to "pursue the removal of Victoriaville Centre and re-establishment of Victoria Avenue"--is based on a myopic view of the situation and doing so is unlikely to advance the social development of the City of Thunder Bay. The second option--"repurposing Victoraville Centre to provide community activities rather than retail activities"-- makes more sense, although I would re-word this option to read: repurposing Victoriaville Centre to provide community activities, while allowing retail development in response to community need.

We can all agree that the development of Keskus and Victoriaville as retail centres in the business districts of "Port Arthur" and "Fort William" was misguided. Although the Intercity Shopping Centre did not open until 1982, a survey of public opinion in 1991 suggested that one third of residents still saw the old downtown districts as primary--although residents of "Port Arthur" saw their downtown as Thunder Bay's primary downtown area (see Mitchell E. Kosny's account in *Thunder Bay: From Rivalry to Unity*, ed. Tronrud and Epp, 242). The 1981 closure of Chapples probably shaped that perception in "Port Arthur," but Eaton's closure in 1997 doomed Keskus. It is now clear that the commercial heart of Thunder Bay is located in the Intercity, spanning the area from The Home Depot in the east to The Superstore in the west. The happiest feature of this development is that it is one development between the old cities--and not a suburban reality, drawing people out of the city.

Secondly, these developments have occurred in a united Canadian city--or one that becomes more united all the time! Urban renewal US-style often occurs in cities from which the white middle class has withdrawn. When I attended The Johns Hopkins University in the Sixties, I became aware that the City of Baltimore was becoming more Black all the time, while white wealth was located in Baltimore County around the city. These people enjoyed the benefits of the city, such as the Symphony Orchestra, but their taxes went to the county rather than the city. The creation of Thunder Bay a few years later ensured that tax revenues here, such as those paid by Great Lakes Paper, enriched the whole city.

One other reality deserves recognition. The Trans-Canada Highway was still routed through Thunder Bay in 1970, but it was shortly afterward re-routed on the Thunder Bay Expressway. The old route remains significant for travel within the city, but May and Arthur streets bypass Victoriaville Centre and the opening of Victoria Avenue would probably not generate much traffic or business. Would Centennial Square gain much from such an opening?

The designation of districts is surely the way to go. I may be ambivalent about the casino that is the largest operation in the Entertainment District located in the "Port Arthur" downtown--although Magnus Theatre is surely a source of pride!--but such re-purposing could be considered for the "Fort William" downtown, too. It is clearly a government centre with important amenities. City Hall and various city offices, the District Social Services Administration Board, the Thunder Bay Historical Museum, the Sports Hall of Fame, the Brodie Street Library, and the City of Thunder Bay Archives are all located in the area. The Federal Building remains in use on the east side of Victoriaville. And the Province has located the Thunder Bay District

Courthouse right next to Victoriaville, and this will surely draw lawyers into offices near the Courthouse.

At the same time, the "Fort William" downtown is an area in which people facing challenges have been congregating. Shelter House is one of the reasons for this gathering--and we need to think about how to assist people, rather than trying to exclude or ignore them. That is particularly important in winter, when people have to leave Shelter House in the morning. St. Joseph's Care Group does its part to deal with some of the challenges. And the Lakehead Social Planning Council has its offices within the Victoriaville Centre. The second option calls for our seeking ways to ameliorate problems and strengthen our community through a deliberate repurposing of Victoriaville.

In doing this, we need to recognize the fact that people live around Victoriaville and that the area could become even more residential than it already is. I am struck by the way in which industry has departed the area; now-vacant blocks could be used to build much-needed housing. Although the Federal Government has not been encouraging co-operative housing recently, building a co-operative housing complex between May and Simpson streets would enhance the residential nature of the area. It could also help to make Victoriaville a lively community centre. That would be creative use of a city asset, rather than our spending money tearing it down in pursuit of an economic will-of-the-wisp!

Respectfully submitted,
Dr. Ernie Epp
Professor Emeritus of History
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