

Taking a closer look

Residents of St. John's got a first look at some survey results from municipal candidates earlier this week and we at the Board of Trade are quite pleased with the participation in that information exercise. Running for political office is no small task. You have to manage your time, pitch your ideas and yourself to a demanding electorate, and basically give up your personal time. There are times we disagree with the views of elected officials – everyone does from time to time – but we greatly appreciate what they are trying to accomplish and the sacrifices they make to contribute to society.

And the Board of Trade is adding to that task. We are asking questions that we, as business owners but also as residents and community volunteers and neighbours, want more information on. Hopefully the answers stimulate debate and encourage people to vote.

There are any number of issues that should attract the attention of residents of St. John's. They might be topical, hot-button news items such as water resources, development, and waste management. Or they might be topics that don't get as much media attention or open public discussion but are still important to many people in the city, such as green space, culture and heritage, and regulation. Whatever the topic, and wherever it is on your own personal priority scale, there is a way to engage in discussion and action that results in continual improvement of our city.

One topic that the Board will be asking more about, and will probably get more debate in the community, is development. A lot of times the focus of the debate is the downtown, and it is fairly easy to understand why. The downtown core has been a centre of business for centuries, attracting both employers and employees. All the while, over those many years, what has happened is that the downtown has created an environment for the springing-up of culture and heritage. Often these seem at odds – business and culture – but they are actually linked and benefit one another.

We are at a very interesting point in the business community, considering the economic upswing we have experienced in the past 5-10 years. There is demand for new office space and new development. Not all of it is downtown but that is a centre of finite space that already has high density and is sought by business. But it's not only businesses that are downtown. There are residents, green spaces, and cultural centres. So we co-exist and contribute to each others' lives.

There are questions though, about the next steps in development. How can we meet the demand for more office space? How are the City's parking study and bicycle master plan linked, and what effect will they have on regional transportation, green space, and urban sprawl? Are the regulations for development currently in place adequate to meet the demands of all stakeholders and provide clarity to developers or businesses who want to locate in our capital? How do we integrate new buildings with heritage sites in a way that is cost-effective, environmentally savvy and widely accepted?

These questions require a lot of thought and foresight by many people. The Board of Trade has and will take positions on these issues and more as our city evolves and grows. These positions are based, and will be based, on some fundamental principles that we want to see reflected in decision-making. Clarity and consistency must be paramount in the application of regulation, which creates the framework for development. Regulations which are clear and unambiguous, and applied without preference or prejudice, will go far to facilitate collaboration between diverse groups. An appeals process for regulation based on principles of fairness, timeliness, and accountability will be central to forward-looking development. Finally, regulations that guide development should be created, revised and

implemented against long term plans of the city, and subject to public consultation or some other form of review.

All of us who live, work and play in St. John's have a stake in how development moves forward because many of our children and grandchildren will live, work and play here. We may have differing views because we have differing needs, but we do have things in common and a collective responsibility to be stewards of the city, even if we are private residents who are not running for Council. A starting point is to be just a little more informed about what happens locally, and ask one more question of candidates. It could be the thought or question that plants a seed in someone's mind and makes this city an even better place. No one has the monopoly on good ideas; let's get those ideas out in public.