

# WINDSOR-ESSEX REGIONAL Chamber of Commerce

## **Marketing key to success** Gina Leslie, Special to The Windsor Star

**Wednesday, April 26, 2006**

When we reflect on a strong economy, we think of employment opportunity and job security. We envision vibrant communities that offer their citizens good quality of life.

For the first time in a long time, the City of Windsor and the County of Essex are facing some serious economic challenges. The prosperity we enjoy as a region is being threatened.

The unemployment rate in Windsor and Essex County continues to soar above the national and provincial average. The latest report from the Statistics Canada Labour Force indicates the unemployment rate for the Windsor area has reached 9.3 per cent, rising from 8.4 per cent in January.

All of the sectors our communities have traditionally relied on for economic prosperity are facing a crisis. A rising Canadian dollar, infrastructure challenges at our border crossings, increasing global competition and other factors are impacting our once prosperous sectors of automotive manufacturing, tourism and agri-business. Jobs are vanishing; business and industry are struggling to compete in the global marketplace.

Over the next few years, our region will continue to experience some of the most challenging economic conditions in Ontario.

These issues require immediate action. The Chamber is urging municipal leaders to move quickly in their appointment of a chief executive officer and nine-member board of directors to the new regional economic development organization. Windsor-Essex County cannot afford to wait any longer.

The two years we have set aside to plan this new direction may have already cost our local economy millions of dollars in missed opportunities. We concur with Windsor Coun. Fulvio Valentinis that "we're already behind the 8-ball," from a related article in the March 30 edition of The Windsor Star.

Every day people make major business decisions. At present, we lack the capability to adequately respond. In our current state, we cannot react to those companies with strong global economic environments that are looking for new locations to expand their operations, nor can we support existing companies.

Without leadership in place to manage and support local companies and potential start-up opportunities, we further contribute to an already strained local economy.

Changing our approach to economic development is an important first step.

Without question, our region is facing a tough road ahead, but our local municipalities are finally on the right path.

The Chamber applauds the unanimous decision of city and county councillors to establish a regional economic development organization that will promote, facilitate and develop a strong unified presence to achieve continued economic growth for the City of Windsor and County of Essex.

We will attract global investors if we package and actively promote the strengths of our region rather than compete alone and against one another.

The Chamber also applauds the decision to include the private sector in this important initiative. A business-led, business-driven board of directors will allow the local business community to take an active role and share their expertise.

This new organization must work cooperatively with all municipalities in the region to retain investment and attract new opportunities to Windsor and Essex County.

It must be fluid and responsive to the needs of the business community. For the continued economic prosperity of our region this initiative must begin now.

As we embark on a regional approach, we have numerous strengths to promote. Global investors will appreciate our geographic location, our critical mass of automotive manufacturing, our transportation and communications infrastructure and our numerous research and development activities. We just have to market them.

Our region's skilled labour force has the technical knowledge to help existing companies shift focus to new business opportunities. We need to access and apply that knowledge.

Collectively, we must work to diversify our local economy and build upon our existing strengths if we hope to maintain the prosperity that this region has enjoyed.

The Chamber concurs with the Regional Economic Development Strategy report that if we can become a desired destination for visitors and investors then Windsor and Essex County will remain an attractive region for companies to invest and people to live, work and play.

Gina Leslie is chair of the Windsor & District Chamber of Commerce board of directors.