

# Essex County optimistic about future



Downtown Windsor, Ont., in the twilight evening hours looking east from Dougall Avenue is pictured in this file photo. (JASON KRYK/The Windsor Star)



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Essex County residents are nervous, but still generally optimistic that better days lay ahead for the region according to a survey on the prospects for growth and prosperity released by the Windsor Essex Economic Development Corporation Thursday.

The survey revealed 67 per cent of respondents were optimistic about the region's prospects for economic growth over the next five years. That figure is down from 76 per cent a year ago.

The on-line survey, which was e-mailed to 3,500 residents across Essex County, drew 771 responses.

The survey was conducted by Sentiens Research from mid-August until mid-September.

“I don’t find the results surprising,” said Helga Reidel, Chief Administrative Officer for the city of Windsor.

“We know there’s still concern about the economy. The world economy is still in a fragile state.

“It tells us a lot of what we know ourselves, but it also tells us we have some work to do.”

Overall, the survey showed a slight decline in optimism in a number of categories.

Other results showed residents rated the area’s economic prospects at 6.8 out of 10 compared to 7.0 in 2011.

Seventy one per cent felt the area’s economy was weak or very weak, an increase of seven per cent and there was a decline of nine per cent (66 per cent) in those who believed the area could create a significant number of jobs by diversification into new markets.

Locals also showed a nine per cent drop (66 per cent) in their belief Windsor and Essex County offered advantages for business from outside the region.

Windsor Essex Regional Chamber of Commerce president Matt Marchand said what sticks out to him is that two-thirds of the respondents in most categories remained optimistic about the area’s future.

“I think the results are very upbeat,” Marchand said.

“We have been through tremendous adversity here in Windsor and Essex County. But we have one of the most resilient business communities in the country.

“Our members are quietly optimistic. We’re moving forward and feel the worst is behind us.”

Marchand said his conversations with his peers re-enforce that opinion.

“I’ve had numerous conversations, several in the past couple of weeks, with companies of significant size telling me (better times are ahead),” Marchand said.

Lakeshore mayor and Essex County warden Tom Bain feels the poll results don't match the reality of what he sees happening or knows is in the pipeline. Bain said people have reason to be even more optimistic about the area's future.

"We've had a slowdown, but things are turning around," Bain said.

"It's out there, it's slow, but the economy is picking up. We have three new subdivisions (in Lakeshore) starting next year.

"Things are happening in Leamington with the greenhouse industry. LaSalle's seeing a lot of residential activity, Tecumseh is more active again (with home starts) and there was a new business (NutraNorth) announced in Windsor (Wednesday)."

Karolyn Hart, WEEDC vice president of marketing, operations and community development, pointed out the irony of the local economic picture. While Windsor suffers with the nation's highest unemployment rate, there are jobs still going begging.

"We're definitely a community that has its feet in two different worlds," Hart said.

"We have the highest unemployment rate in Canada, yet we can't find enough people in the skilled trades to fill the jobs."

One of the interesting results in the survey is the poor self-perception locals residents felt the area has. Seventy one per cent of respondents said residents suffer from poor self-perception and 77 per cent feel the area is underappreciated by Canadians from outside Essex County.

Alfie Morgan, University of Windsor business professor emeritus, believes that's a misleading statistic.

"I don't think that people from here think poorly of the area," Morgan said. "I think that reflects the worry people have about how the rest of Canada perceives the area.

"We have to change these misconceptions."

Morgan points out that an even higher percentage (76) of the same respondents said they were proud to say they were from Essex County. He also noted 86 per cent of those not born here, who have moved here, said the region met or exceeded their expectations.

“That reflects my experience,” Marchand said.

“Late this summer we had meetings with some investors from the southern U.S. who were looking at doing something here. It was their first time here and they were impressed with the community.

“They’ve already quietly started to do so some business here.”

Reidel and Bain added one of the area’s shortcomings is our reluctance to blow our own horn. Both remember the judges in the Smart Communities competition telling them the area was almost apologetic about itself.

“That comes from knowing what people are saying about us who know nothing about our area,” Reidel said. “We’ve got to get our message out.”

Hart said the survey this year also included a number of requests from local businesses or communities for specific questions to be included.

Caesar’s Windsor, the University of Windsor and the Essex Pelee Island Coast winery group were among that group.

“It helps them understand how they’re perceived,” Hart said. “They’re using it develop strategy moving forward.”