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*By email*

Mr. Harris:

Re. Town of Parry Sound 2020-2030 Strategic Plan (v2020-02-04) – Comments

I think that involved Town of Parry Sound council members and staff would be helped by reading the article “The Big Lie of Strategic Planning” by Roger L. Martin, former Dean of the Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto, published in the January-February 2014 Issue of the Harvard Business Review (<https://hbr.org/2014/01/the-big-lie-of-strategic-planning>). A number of my concerns regarding the Town of Parry Sound 2020-2030 Strategic plan align with his comments. While his article focuses on for profit companies rather than municipalities, the issues and the concerns are remarkably consistent. Companies increasingly need to integrate environmental and social issues into their strategic plans to ensure long term profitability and sustainability. At the same time, municipalities are increasingly being pressed to better manage their bottom lines as higher level government support drops and taxpayers rebel against ever increasing taxation without clear enhancements or improvement in quality of life. Both types of organizations face change.

I believe that the Strategic plan should be clearer on the strategic goal(s) of the Town of Parry Sound. I feel the plan as presented is a summary of the major concerns of each and every interest group in the Town without clear prioritization, timelines or hard objectives. Much of the plan is aspirational.

### **Key Points**

#### **Timeline**

A good plan should have timelines that provide for some sense of accountability. The 2020-2030 timeline suggests a plan and performance that can only be judged in a decade. That is, in my opinion, too long. At most a five-year timeline should have been adopted with perhaps a mention of a decade long view.

#### **Hard Objectives and Focus**

The plan seems to summarize the most important concerns and interests of the individuals who participated in the plan. By my count there are more than 40 ‘soft objectives’ listed in the plan. These are all reasonable actions but do not rise to the level of objectives, aren’t strategic, and have no associated accountability. These soft objectives for the most part represent tactical actions. A listing of objectives as actions does not represent strategy.

I cannot argue with any of these ‘soft objectives’. They are all reasonable actions for the Town to undertake. Focus is not achieved by heading in 40 different directions even if there are multiple

departments involved. Many of these soft objectives should not even be listed, and rather be part of the culture of the organization or an operational plan. Examples would be:

- Conduct annual tracking and reporting of energy usage
- Develop and implement a plan with regional partners to reduce the area's carbon footprint
- In conjunction with our partners drive towards becoming a Net Zero community

As listed, these points, among many others, represent the 'culture' of an organization much as honesty and kindness represents the culture of an individual. If they are to be listed, they should be accompanied by hard targets and timelines. For example: Achieve Net Zero community status by year 202X. The intermediate milestone is to achieve 80% of Net Zero by 202X-3 years.

## **A Strategic Plan for the Town of Parry Sound**

It is easier to tear things down than it is to conceive, design, and build things. What might I have suggested?

### **A Town of Parry Sound Strategic Plan (2020 to 2025, with suggestions through 2030)**

#### **Vision**

The Town of Parry Sound is the economic, commercial and services hub of the West Parry Sound District. The role and goals of the Town will align with enhancing the Town's sustainability - economically, environmentally and quality of life, while enhancing the human and commercial experience of the larger area.

#### **Strategic Overview**

Develop greater critical mass that will attract additional human and financial capital and allow for additional services and opportunity. (This would include increasing population density to provide more profitable business and service opportunities while attracting private and governmental investment.)

#### **Strategic Objectives**

1. Review, revise, and update development policies to incorporate best practices that will incent outside investment in more higher density housing that leverage the Town's existing infrastructure investments, provide more diverse housing options to spur population and economic growth that will provide a larger tax base to support additional infrastructure investments. (2021) *A virtuous cycle*.
2. Negotiate and finalize agreements with area municipalities for land transfer that fit with Town infrastructure resources and which provide opportunities for housing development that will support additional services with a benefit for collaborating municipalities. (2021-2023) *Win-win in providing more and better services for all area municipal residents*.
3. And so on to a maximum of five strategic objectives.

This is a sense of what a Strategic plan might include with some suggestion of the direction I think it might take. Reminder – I am not a municipal strategic planner.

## **Additional Thoughts**

I return to a development model I have raised in previous posts at ParrySounds ([parrysounds.com](http://parrysounds.com)) that might provide some sense of direction for the Town – Singapore and Hong Kong.

Don't reject the suggestion without thinking about it a little. While these cities differ from the Town of Parry Sound in terms of populations, they share three important similarities.

1. These communities are severely restricted in the land available for development.
2. They are bordered by jurisdictions that are generally apathetic to the interests and needs of these cities.
3. They serve as an economic hub for the larger region.

There are lessons these communities can offer in terms of what they offer, what they don't, and how they focused their strategy to achieve their current success. Like these metropolises the Town needs to forego any illusions about becoming a quaint little community. There is nothing quaint about two railways running dozens of miles-long trains through the middle of the town, or downtown businesses that struggle to survive. The Town needs to understand that it occupies a very natural position in the area that it needs to embrace.

One key element missing from the Strategic plan was a frank statement of Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats/Challenges. Understanding the limitations and opportunities that exist can make it much easier to define a focused strategy.

An example would be geography. At one point the Town, at the mouth of the Seguin River, had geographical strength as a location for the collection, processing and shipping of timber products that it recognized as an opportunity. Now though, the distance of the Town from major markets suggests that the local manufacturing of goods requiring provincial, national or international distribution will not be economically attractive except for high value products (custom boats, specialty products that leverage Town assets or image). It's not clear that the Town and area has any real competitive capabilities that would support this type of manufacturing. On the other hand, with existing access to high speed telecommunications the Town can be competitive with any other community for supplying online services while providing the much sought after quality of life benefits of outdoor access. This is not necessarily a competitive advantage, but it is a competitive consideration. The ability to provide quick access to the 30,000 Islands also represents a Strength as does the excellent access afforded by Highway 400. Defining and understanding the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and challenges of the Town is an important step in developing a meaningful strategic plan.

## **Final Thoughts**

The Strategic Plan as presented is a recipe for basic survival. The same old, same old, but more of it with comforting images. The plan does not provide a vision or hope for a different and/or better tomorrow. I guess that is okay. I have been advised by others to chill, that the unofficial Town motto is the "town of good enough". I suppose the proposed strategic plan is good enough.

### **Personal Experience**

I have been involved with strategy on the business side for most of my professional life. An experience in participating in the development of a strategic plan with a local non-profit organization may provide a sense of what developing a meaningful strategic plan actually takes.

I was a board member of an organization providing social services with a multimillion-dollar annual budget, multiple facilities, and a couple hundred employees. I was one of two board members who volunteered to participate in developing the strategic plan. This involved:

1. Two board members, about five members of senior management, and a rotating cast of manager level employees who provided additional perspective.
2. Two strategic planning consultants who provided a structure to the process and who pushed and prodded the team to continuously move forward.
3. Previously completed surveys of clients and employees.
4. About 6 or 8 meetings of the team, each of which lasted about 4 hours. In all the process took between 20-30 hours of face-to-face senior management and board member time. This did not include meeting preparation and follow up of the team and the consultants.

The most important learning of the process was that the crystallization of a strategic goal only came in meeting number four or five, or after about 20 hours of engaged discussion. Town of Parry Sound Staff has perhaps invested that amount of time in working on the strategic plan, but has Council? Much like a board member, Council on occasion times needs to invest the time to get into the details of the business and a strategic plan.

Sincerely,



Josef Bossart