

Business Owners and Barrie City Hall Report Card - 2009 Survey

In September and October, 2009, the Chamber conducted a survey of individual businesses which was intended to assess the interactions with Barrie City Council and City staff. The intent was to allow the Government Affairs Committee to provide reliable information to the City of Barrie concerning the interaction of Barrie business people with Council and City staff and to gauge the success of the current Council and City staff with respect to a number of areas of concern.

Unfortunately, while there were a 159 responses, which is a very good survey response rate, the survey design permitted a section to be skipped with no response. "No response" proved to be a popular choice. This made the survey results statistically unreliable. As a result, a decision was made to create this narrative report rather than to present a statistically unreliable report to the membership.

A typical survey respondent was the owner or manager of a Chamber member which employed fewer than 20 employees, and had gross sales of less than one million dollars per year. Most of the survey respondents represented local businesses conducting a majority of their operations within the City of Barrie and elsewhere within the County of Simcoe. Business activity of the respondents within the County and City accounted for approximately three quarters of the business activity reported by all the respondents.

The first survey section dealt with strategic priorities for the City; the responses assessing the level of accomplishment of City Council. Where those strategic priorities dealt with the social life of Barrie, such as enhancing public spaces or encouraging culture as an economic driver, City Council fared reasonably well. The respondents, in general, rated the City's performance at the 50% level for these priorities.

City Council fared very poorly, however, with respect two of the business issues, such as attracting or retaining business in Barrie or behaving with a degree of fiscal responsibility to control spending and/or obtain good value. For both of these issues, the largest number of respondent's ranked Council at the lowest possible level of satisfaction. The comments section reflected significant concern with a lack of cohesion at Council, the refusal of Council to accept rational staff planning recommendations, the constant purchasing of planning reports from outside consultants only to be ignored, and the lack of fiscal responsibility within the City, generally.

A greater concern was the disconnect between the public and the City. A typical comment was:

While recent happenings have suggested willingness for public participation, historically the City has neglected to get participation from affected parties before implementing actions (e.g. Development Charges Study, new industrial zoning by-law, review of site plan control procedure)

In the business friendliness section of the survey, the vast majority of respondents did not agree that the City of Barrie was an attractive place for their business. Most did not agree that the

City of Barrie had worked with their business to ensure their success or offered a business friendly environment. It is interesting, however, that while most respondents did not rate Barrie as a business friendly City nor did they agree with KPMG's 2008 Competitive Alternative Study, very few intended to leave the City. Approximately 50% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that they would not move. This suggests that business is successful within the City of Barrie in spite of the attitudes within City hall, rather than because of those attitudes.

Again with the issue of City Council accessibility, Councillors generally failed to achieve a passing grade. A majority of the respondents felt that Council had not achieved satisfactory results, did not work together as an effective team, and did not respond in a timely, knowledgeable and professional manner to inquiries put to them. The comments section suggested that most of the responses in this area arose from a strong perception that Council lacked vision and leadership.

City staff, on the other hand, ranked substantially better than Council. For example, the questions concerning customer service levels, knowledge and professionalism of City staff received high marks. In addition, the respondents described their dealings with City staff as fair, satisfactory and transparent in their dealings, discussions and treatment.

The only consistent complaint concerning City staff was the speed of dealing with material.

With respect to the Economic Development Office, a surprising number of respondents were not aware that the City had an Economic Development Office. Those that were aware were generally supportive by the work done by the EDO believing it was crucial to attract new business to Barrie and to retain new businesses in Barrie. The perception among the respondents was, however, that the EDO concentrated largely on big business and neglected a small business sector. In view of the profile of the typical survey respondent, however, the likelihood of significant interaction with the EDO is low. The responses may, therefore, be based more upon perception of the effectiveness of the EDO rather than the reality.

The last section of the survey dealt with traffic congestion and infrastructure projects which were to a greater or lesser degree intertwined. Unfortunately, the large number of no responses to these questions makes even a narrative summary difficult. The only fair comment that can be made, however, comes from the respondents who stated that the business was located near a construction or infrastructure project. Two thirds of those respondent felt that their businesses had been negatively impacted by the project. There were a variety of opinions in the comments section such as, "We complain if they DON'T fix our roads and infrastructure and complain when they DO..." which fairly reflects the difficulty that the City faces keeping everyone happy all of the time. Some criticism was more focussed,

Some years ago the City installed new sewers on Dunlop Street west, closing access to Mary Street which is one way northbound. No notice to the business owners and no alternate routes. Then they decided there should be no street parking when the project was almost over. Essentially a stupid decision.

Unfortunately, it appears that Dunlop Street West is being torn up again. Hopefully the City will better accommodate the businesses affected on Dunlop Street West and Mary Street this time and perhaps largely avoid the closing of the Dunlop Street West and Mary Street intersection.

In summary, it is fair to make the following points.

The respondents to the survey intend to stay in Barrie but are unimpressed by the leadership demonstrated by City Council while awarding higher marks to City staff. Clearly, however, the respondents desired better communication and particularly, consultation prior to decisions being made.

Lastly, running through the comments was a particular theme. The respondents desired the City to lead, follow or get out of the way.

prepared by the Governmental Affairs Committee of the Greater Barrie Chamber of Commerce
2009/2010

Monika Maizis - Chair

Brendon Saxton
David Service
Sharron-Ann Reynolds

John Tom
Sophie Fleming