

Why can't we all be on the same side?

When looking at the current dispute regarding the proposed OlyWest food processing plant The Winnipeg Chamber of Commerce is continually asked whose side are we on?

The first side is that of OlyWest who provided The Chamber with a clear understanding of their business case, the process they embarked on before deciding on the location in question and their plans for the future.

The second side is that of the Oly-Opp group made up primarily of businesses in the St. Boniface Industrial Park. They have clearly indicated to The Chamber that they are not opposed to the OlyWest plant, just the proposed location and their concern is the potentially negative impact it could have on their existing business due to its proximity.

The Chamber believed it was important to hear from both sides on the issue and in fact we are the only organization that facilitated a meeting between the two sides to ensure they both had a clear understanding of each other's viewpoints. It also provided The Chamber with a clear understanding that there is no solution that will satisfy both sides.

The mission of The Winnipeg Chamber of Commerce which represents over 1,700 businesses is to foster an environment in which Winnipeg business can prosper. Using that as a tipping point The Chamber could never say that we are opposed to a \$200-million private sector investment that will create 1,100 jobs and hundreds of potential spin-off jobs. However at the same time we can't ignore the concerns of existing businesses in the area.

So which side should The Winnipeg Chamber of Commerce take?

This brings us to the third side of the issue. The Chamber calls this the 'big picture' side and the side that no level of government seems willing to look at.

The Chamber has continually lobbied both the provincial and municipal government to clearly outline an economic development strategy that can be measured for success. The OlyWest situation exemplifies why this is critical and why government must stop ignoring our plea and take action.

The Chamber also believes the current situation would be different if we had a comprehensive Capital Region strategy that addresses tax equity, economic development, planning co-ordination and strategic regional infrastructure investment.

In October 2003, the final report of the Regional Planning Advisory Committee was released which called upon the 'Government of Manitoba and the leaders of the sixteen Manitoba Capital Region municipalities to engage in a conscious exercise in region building.'

The Report concluded that a strong Capital Region would allow Manitoba to 'compete more effectively, efficiently address social, environmental and economic issues that cross municipal boundaries.'

In an April 2004 news release former Intergovernmental Affairs and Trade Minister MaryAnn Mihychuk stated that “after over 70 studies on the Capital Region spanning three decades, it is time to pull up our sleeves and get to work on the important issues facing the region.”

Unfortunately, other than passing legislation enabling municipalities to talk to each other, no meaningful action has taken place and this latest in a long list of reports sits on a shelf in government offices collecting dust.

The Chamber believes that a Capital Region strategy would provide Manitoba and Winnipeg with greater flexibility and opportunity to pursue various business sectors. We would urge the province to take a leadership role and implement the recommendations of the RPAC Report.

The Chamber will not take sides in a case that pits business against business where in order for one side to win - one side must lose. It is irresponsible for all levels of government to simply wash their hands of the issue and allow this to happen. What kind of message does this send to the business community?

If we really want to move this province and city forward we need to get everyone on the same side with a common vision and a clear plan and strategy for the future.

Executive Committee
Board of Directors
The Winnipeg Chamber of Commerce