

GETTING AROUND THE OKANAGAN – EFFICIENTLY FOR BUSINESS, EFFICIENTLY FOR THE FUTURE

When you spend your working days in a Chamber of Commerce – anywhere in our country, likely – issues cross your desk every single day. Whether you're at an after-hours networker, a Chamber luncheon, a board meeting, a meeting with elected officials – any time you are in contact with your business members, by email, by phone, or face to face: you'll hear about what matters most to people.

What keeps them up at night? What are the constraints on growing their business? How to thrive, not just survive, as the modern mantra goes. Three key issues come up every time, over time, every single time, which are constraining business growth: labour needs; taxation and regulatory issues; and transportation. There are other top of mind issues, such as accessible housing, public safety – but the big three repeat over and over as businesses push against the seams of government policies and over-regulation.

The Kelowna Chamber has been pursuing transportation solutions doggedly for the past number of years. In 2019, we submitted a new policy at the annual BC Chamber policy session, with the support of Chamber colleagues throughout the Okanagan Valley. Called “Accelerating Transportation Infrastructure to serve one of the fastest growing Regional Economies in Canada” the policy made five recommendations.

First, establish a long-term vision for the Okanagan transportation network. Commit to a multi-lane highway spanning the entire region. Second, re-engage the business community and government to accelerate planning and implementation of a second crossing of Okanagan Lake; create highway bypass routes near population centres; create grade-separated interchanges along Highway 97 to reduce negative impact of stop and go industrial traffic; realign Highway 3 to improve the flow of commerce and tourism.

The final three recommendations call for the province to work with the Federal government, transportation authorities in Washington State and regional governments to look at models which will serve local industry, trans-Okanagan industry, and speed up border crossings into and out of the US.

We've pitched our policy to the BC ministry of transportation, and as well, saw it adopted at the Canadian Chamber policy session in September of this year. Business gets it: every hour spent in a traffic jam or at a red light, or crawling along a congested highway cuts into profits, increases GHG emissions, saws through allowable driving time, means one or two fewer customers get a sales call. Commuters feel the pain, as well, having to allot more time than should be required to get from A to B and back again.

Interesting side note here: as we push to get these recommendations implemented by the provincial government, we are in the midst of writing another transportation policy which we plan to take to our colleagues at the May 2020 provincial policy session, this year in Prince George. It's called The Hydrail

Project. This is the ambitious plan being promoted by a professor at UBC, Dr Gordon Lovegrove, in concert with the Ku'Il Group, based on Penticton Indian Band land in the south Okanagan. Hydrail will transport commuters up and down the Okanagan valley, using road right of ways, with hydrogen power. Hydrogen power got a bad rap twenty years ago or more, but today is emission free, (except water), can be cheap to use and cost-effective to produce (Ku'Il Group plans to build a plant on PIB land in the south Okanagan), and mimic success with similar projects already up and running in Europe. Elon Musk of Tesla dismisses the technology as "stupid," so he clearly sees it as a threat. Our Chamber needs to do some more research but are confident we'll have a fully-fledged policy to table by March of 2020.

The City of Kelowna, meanwhile, has just announced another series of community workshops around transportation, and we'll be attending these, and trying to move the dial on the importance of industrial traffic. It's not all about commuters, and pedestrian- and bicycle-friendly commuter routes. It's about making business more efficient, and more sustainable.

In other news, we're about to launch our 'Top Forty Under Forty' program sponsored by BDO – we'll be taking nominations and featuring outstanding young individuals from January of this year through to early summer. This is the sixth year of the program for our Chamber, and we're delighted to have the Kelowna Capital News, Bell Media and Castanet/Okanagan Edge again taking our stories to their thousands of readers every week. Definitely a win for all of us as we learn more about the high-contributing young business people in the Okanagan.

Finally, we couldn't help but notice that our President's Circle member Interior Savings Credit Union was in the news last week – attacked for supporting a community fundraising event (Ribfest) for the Kelowna General Hospital in support of housing for families from outside the city which require shelter while their family members are undergoing treatment at KGH – many of them children, and many of them on repeat visits for treatment. Reason for the attack? Meat is featured at the fundraiser – as well as non-meat alternatives.

We support the credit union's statement on the issue (protesters chaining themselves to the credit union's doors and blocking access for employees and customers): "Like most community events, it offers a selection of food options to suit people's preferences. Interior Savings appreciates and respects that everyone has a right to their opinion, to share their opinion and to choose a diet that makes sense for them."

So, was this really news? It's becoming a bit harder to tell, as professional journalism is increasingly augmented by some news outlets that seem to chase and report on narrow or self-serving interests. We're concerned this shift increases the focus on what divides us, rather than emphasizing our common shared values.

Let's take a moment, refocus on issues of substance, reported by trained, objective, fact-checking journalists who are able to see when they are being manipulated by those seeking attention. Life and business are hard enough without having to deal with made-for-media protests that are increasingly focused on disrupting the lives of others as a means to get attention in the media. These protesters are deliberately taking extreme measures for they know the ambulance-chasing media will follow and give them a free platform to air their grievance no matter how trivial it may be. Expressing your opinion on any issue in a civil manner is a fundamental right but chaining yourself to a door of a corporate sponsor of a clearly popular and lawful event that raises money for social causes in the community is a bit much.

Interior Savings commented afterwards that they remain committed to supporting top-notch community events that raise tens of thousands of dollars for those in our community who need a helping hand. Well said and well-done Interior Savings! Your commitment to serving this region is well illustrated and the Chamber applauds you for your tremendous contributions to so many worthwhile causes in Kelowna and elsewhere.

I'll step down from my platform, now, and say "Welcome" to our newest members, joining our Chamber since my last column: **Wolterland Estates; Meticulosity; Grizzly Force; Pur & Simple; Kelowna Accountants; Hal Green Consulting Ltd.** *Welcome all!*



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