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Next Council Should Decide Arena Project

by PAUL LEFEBVRE

When I announced my intention to run for Mayor of Greater Sudbury back in April, I made a number of commitments to citizens and taxpayers. Among them was a commitment to ensure we respect every tax dollar by investing in projects that provide the services and amenities citizens want and will help us attract investment, additional tourism and new residents. Sustainable growth of our tax base should be our goal and carefully analyzing each dollar spent should be our guiding principle.

In considering this principle, I have a lot of concerns about the city's proposed Kingsway Entertainment District project. Clearly, it's time to pause this project and re-evaluate. Here's why.

Let's start with the costs. Sudbury taxpayers' share is now \$215 million, more than double the original maximum price. In light of this, city staff recommend taxpayers borrow an additional \$100 million dollars at 5% interest to move forward, potentially costing us \$5 million in additional interest cost alone. We taxpayers will be paying for that.

We must also keep in mind that \$215 million is the minimum cost to taxpayers. It may further increase. This may well make the new arena at the KED the most expensive public single-pad arena of that size in the history of Ontario. Obviously, this is not affordable.

It is important to remind taxpayers that many of the cost escalators have to do with the taxpayers' share of bringing service to the new site. According to the report prepared for council, roads, intersection improvements, drainage, parking and transit services will cost taxpayers more than \$50 million on top of the \$135 million price tag for the new building.

This is a very dangerous precedent. Why are taxpayers building roads for a casino and hotel? I can only imagine that anyone developing private land in this city will now expect that Sudbury taxpayers should contribute to their infrastructure costs as well.

The time has come to rethink this entire project. There are components of this project we can change right now to breathe new life into it.

First, commit to using existing infrastructure and remove that cost from the project budget. This provision already exists in the City of Greater Sudbury Official Plan, which clearly has not been followed throughout this process.

Second, be open to supporting and growing existing business that cluster around that infrastructure. City council should be working with existing local businesses and attracting new ones.

Third, better communication. This project did not balloon to \$215 million overnight. The Mayor campaigned on a platform of open government and has had five years to communicate with citizens about the implications and costs of the project. Why are taxpayers learning about them at the eleventh hour – followed by a recommendation that taxpayers borrow still more money to pay for them – is a question that needs to be asked.

Finally, if we do elect to enter into partnerships – which would enhance and create a better return for our community – we need to secure binding agreements that make it clear that costs will be shared among the partners.

These are common sense first steps. Let's determine true community needs, capital costs, operating costs and benefits. Much of this work has already been completed by a series of consultants retained by council. Let's dust off those reports and have a thorough second look.

In the end, we have to work together to find solutions to see this project through in a way that meets our needs, that builds on our goals of developing sustainably and improves the social, economic and employment fabric of our city. Most importantly, let's find solutions that will bring our community together rather than divide us.

Now is not the time to rush the largest and most strategic investment our city has ever made, with so little time left to make a considered and informed decision. This would also create a no-win situation for the new council with little ability to look at the project with a fresh perspective and renewed criteria.

I was encouraged to learn that a majority of this council is ready to re-evaluate their commitment to the proposed project. This, of course, is a direct result of the sticker shock of the \$215 million price tag. I understand council may instead consider a diminished version of the arena – possibly capped at \$150 million. But let's be clear, any such change in scope of this project will require revisiting the tendering process. The integrity of the competitive bidding process must be respected.

We must learn from this, take a step back, re-evaluate the true costs and benefits this project may bring over the long term and then move forward strategically under the leadership of a new council. It's time to make Greater Sudbury citizens and businesses part of the process, fully informed in a timely way. It's time to work together to make good things happen for all Sudburians.

Paul Lefebvre is candidate for mayor of the City of Greater Sudbury.

