

Viewpoint

City should defer development of northwest industrial park

By Dan McCreary

Brantford's Northwest Industrial Area, planned during the 1980s, was intended to accommodate anticipated industrial demand as projected for this decade and beyond.

Since its conception, however, much has changed. Ontario's industrial base has been eroded and nowhere is this more evident than in Brantford. The province of Ontario has, through its actions and ignorance, created a very inhospitable climate for business. We have failed to keep pace with industrial opportunities south of the border.

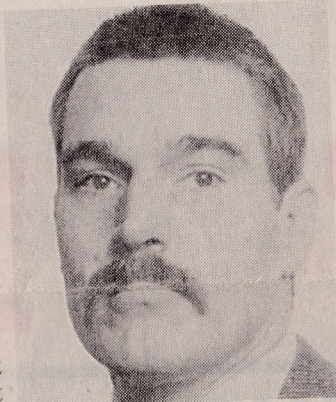
The Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement and NAFTA have eliminated the incentives for many manufacturers to locate or remain in Ontario. As a result, we have experienced a southward exodus of industry and a resulting net decline in industrial activity. It is unreasonable to think that this southward trend will abate in the near future.

This trend has greatly diminished the market for industrial land throughout southern Ontario. It is therefore most im-

and Barrie have similar inventories of orphan industrial sites and available industrial land. Brantford must compete with every other industrialized centre for the ever-decreasing demand for industrial space.

On balance, it would appear that a strong case can be made for defer-

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We have pursued growth as an end in itself in this city without serious regard to the resulting social and economic costs. We have no clear destination on this road to growth, nor any concerns for places we bypass along the way.

The need for, and means of, accomplishing real municipal growth

cases no real growth results. Such is the case in Brantford with regard to retail space. Real growth in the retail sector has not matched the physical growth of shopping areas, malls and strip development. Such developments have resulted in a wholesale emptying of Colborne Street and a reduced retail presence in our city centre as a whole.

Real and sustainable growth must become the goal of the municipality as opposed to expensive and expansive suburbanization in the industrial sector. We need to maximize existing facilities and resources and acquire the political will to do so in opposition to traditional planning solutions. By first reclaiming, reusing or redeveloping our fully serviced orphan industrial sites, we gain all the benefits of industrial expansion. We also avoid incurring the social and economic costs associated with building an industrial park well in advance of its need. Utilizing existing resources first will enable full application of the resulting tax base increase to the maintenance and improvement of our

think that this southward trend will abate in the near future.

This trend has greatly diminished the market for industrial land throughout southern Ontario. It is therefore most improbable that the industrial demand projections used to justify the Northwest Industrial Area remain valid.

The assessment of need for such a development requires more than a cursory examination of inventory and demand. At present, 265 acres remain available in the Braneida Industrial Area. The City of Brantford owns all but 100 acres. The original Braneida development encompassed 1,500 acres and over a 30-year period has reached only 80 per cent capacity. Much of this capacity included the Massey-Ferguson combine plant, a development whose scale is unlikely to be repeated in Brantford. It is unlikely that demand for serviced industrial sites will again reach the level present in 1988. It is more likely that demand will approximate 1983-1985 levels of less than 20 acres per year. Given this projection, our current inventory will be sufficient for another decade.

It is important to realize that Brantford also has a significant inventory of orphan industrial sites. Despite official claims to the contrary, nearly all vacant industrial sites remain viable for reuse as general industrial sites or redevelopment sites. Already many vacant factories have been recycled as manufacturing sites or converted to other uses. Any viable industrial strategy must take into account this major resource prior to embarking on further development of industrial space.


This same scenario is repeated throughout southern Ontario. Other cities such as Scarborough

demand for industrial space.

On balance, it would appear that a strong case can be made for deferment of the Northwest Industrial Area based strictly on the lack of short-term need for the project. There are other factors, however, which tip the scales of balance even further.

There have been assertions that the project may entail some serious environmental concerns. If correct, there could be a risk of contamination of the Grand River and potential health risks to downstream users of the water supply.

In addition, there is some dispute as to ownership of a portion of the lands involved. People of the Six Nations may have a legitimate, if not legal, claim which, like all such claims, has been ignored by government far too long.



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is the underlying issue at the heart of the Northwest Industrial Area plan. This issue has received little debate within council or within the municipality as a whole. Growth of the municipality has always been based on looking outward and forever expanding our boundaries.

It becomes increasingly evident that we can no longer sustain such suburban growth, when in fact we cannot adequately maintain or improve existing infrastructure. Can our tax base support a new industrial subdivision when we have to rely on financial assistance from other levels of government to pay for paving of Erie Avenue?

Quite often, suburban growth can exceed demand, and in such

concerns for places we bypass along the way.

The need for, and means of, accomplishing real municipal growth

ic costs associated with building an industrial park well in advance of its need. Utilizing existing resources first will enable full application of the resulting tax base increase to the maintenance and improvement of our existing infrastructure. We also gain a benefit by helping to defer future increases to our already onerous property taxes which would result from carrying and maintaining a nearly-vacant industrial park until maturity.

To enact such a policy first requires the political will to do so. All too often, the municipality follows the path of least resistance. A project such as the Northwest Industrial Area will acquire a life of its own and come to fruition despite significant changes in the criteria which originally indicated a need. It is all too easy to plan, fund and implement grand and costly schemes which do not fully address the problem to be solved. It is more difficult to commit to a solution which cannot manifest itself visually as a testament to those involved.

We must choose the difficult course and defer construction of the Northwest Industrial Area until such time as the need exists and development can be sustained socially and financially. We can commit to a policy of marketing on a pro-active basis such industrial space as currently exists in inventory. Rather than trying to be all things to all people, we can market available space effectively to qualified prospects, both Canadian and foreign.

Such a course of action will not be easy, but the benefits will far outweigh those of the Northwest Industrial Area proposal.

Dan McCreary is a member of the Brantford Heritage Committee.

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