

Massey aftermath: A city transformed

BRANTFORD - The bankruptcy and subsequent closing of the Massey Combine Corp. plant on Park Road North - now the Wayne Gretzky Parkway - was a harsh kick in the collective stomach of the community. But it didn't kill Brantford. In some ways it made the city stronger. "The move into post-secondary education has revolutionized and revitalized the downtown," Brantford Mayor Chris Friel said. "It has brought in money and industry. "We have four post-secondary school institutions in our downtown, five in our community as a whole, which is unique. There's not another community that can boast that or boast the kind of revitalization we've had in our downtown."

The community has two universities, Laurier Brantford and Nipissing, as well as Mohawk College and Conestoga College. There is also a partnership between the Brant Community Healthcare System and McMaster University. "We're creating role models," Friel said. "We're creating a culture of education and lifelong learning in Brantford and we're being very successful." The culture of education and the strong post-secondary school presence is in stark contrast to the Brantford of Friel's youth.

"I have this clear recollection of my friend who lived across the street. He had a brother who dropped out of school at 16 to go work at Massey's," Friel said. "He came home, driving up in his (Dodge) Charger and it was a beautiful car. That's what happened. "You turned 16, you dropped out of school and went to work with dad, brothers and uncles." There is something else that's different about Brantford these days, he added. The community's economy is more diversified and no longer dependent on one company or one industry. As a result of that diversification, the community was able to deal with the latest economic recession better than a lot of other communities, Friel said.

A lot of the credit for the economic diversification has to go to actions of city council under the direction of some of his predecessors - namely former mayors Karen George and Dave Neumann, who is now a city councillor representing Ward 5. Neumann was mayor in the early 1980s but left to become the MPP. He was replaced by George, who had only been in the city's top elected position for a few months when Massey's went into receivership. "It was very hard for people to accept," she said. "The whole city went through the various stages of grieving and then of course, a couple of years later the recession of the early 1990s hit and that was pretty difficult too.

"We tried to stay positive because we knew what we had to do to move forward, but we also knew that a lot of people didn't want to hear that." In the immediate aftermath of the closing, there were a couple of issues on the top of George's priority list.

First, she and the city officials had to deal with people who were very upset and at the same time come up with a way to rebuild the city when a big gaping hole had just been knocked through its industrial base. "There was a lot of work with the economic development board and city staff to develop strategies based on trying to attract the small- and medium-sized businesses that have potential to grow," George said. "We also had this big piece of industrial land that wasn't being used and so we had to put a big emphasis on developing more industrial land. "Those were the

strategies at the time and I think, ultimately, they have been proven to be successful." The city now has the Northwest Industrial Area in the Oak Park Road area and the economy is much more diversified now than it was when Massey's was king.

In addition to the loss of jobs, there were various related challenges to deal with in the aftermath. Work began to bring the city to a zero deficit at the same time as it built a new library and police station. The downtown also needed attention and the city had another problem. "At the time we had one of the lowest proportion of high school students going off to post-secondary education of any other community our size or type," George said. "We had an abysmal drop-out rate and that's why council put such an effort into getting Mohawk College here." The drop-out rate was also why there was such a push to get a new and better library, she added.

With respect to the downtown, her council and each successive city council did something to improve the downtown, said George. The diversification of the economy is something that began with Neumann and continued with George. When Friel took office, the process was well underway. Brant MPP Dave Levac praised the work of those councils for taking the steps and making the decisions to move the community away from become dependent on one big company or industry.

"There is no magic bullet, no one company that is going to do it all for us," Levac said. "Our economy is more diversified today than it was then and now if one company closes its doors the impact isn't as great." Neumann and the council of his day were instrumental in getting the city designated as a community that could access federal government funds to help create jobs and provide employment for those who were left jobless. The program was aimed at both industry and labour. On the industry side, it provided interest-free loans to companies that wanted to expand but couldn't do it because of the high interest rates being charged by traditional lenders back then. The government provided half of the funding needed while traditional lenders provided the other half. The net benefit was that instead of being charged 20% interest on the loan, companies had to pay 10% which was enough of a break, in many cases, to make the project worthwhile.

There were between 40 and 50 companies that we able to use the program over a three-year period, Neumann said. "I think the lesson here is to remain resilient and remain open to new possibilities," Neumann said. "Many of those people who were laid off from those high paying jobs had to make an adjustment but a lot of them found other things they could do. "As a community, we can't be reliant on something and believe that it will be there forever. We have to remain strong in our diversity and our approach to grow." There was, in the two or three years leading up to the closing of Massey's, hope that an industrial restructuring would do something - but it turned out to be a forlorn hope."They (Massey) built an office building in downtown Brantford called Massey House," Neumann said. "It's now a university residence."