

Warden Nelson Santos
Inaugural Warden's Luncheon – Windsor & District Chamber of Commerce
January 9th, 2008
Lakeside Park Pavilion
Kingsville, Ontario

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen, friends, neighbours, and fellow Mayors, Deputy Mayors, and Councillors who have made their way to one of Canada's Most Southern Pavilions. And allow me and my fellow municipal council to "welcome" you to Kingsville's 100 year-old Lakeside Park. – And welcome to my playground!

Today's event marks new territory for me personally, as this is the first time that I have had the privilege to address you as your Warden on the State of our County. But it also represents a new day and commitment from the Windsor & District Chamber of Commerce.

The Chamber's vision is becoming more regional in focus and I can attest to their efforts over the past year alone as we have made it a point to meet on at least a quarterly basis to discuss issues, programs, ideas and concerns that effect all of us across Essex County and the City of Windsor.

And today, I do say thank you to the Chamber for bringing forward this idea of hosting today's inaugural Warden's Luncheon as it does truly represent an important first step of many more to come, geared at engaging the businesses in our County. I am hopeful that the Chamber will also engage our existing County Chambers and possibly some of our BIA's in the near future as well. As I do believe that strengthening the bond between neighbouring Chambers and reaching out to business leaders and owners, would in fact strengthen the voice of our business community as a whole and collectively could provide complementary resources and an exchange of opportunities in support of our businesses during these challenging times. Judging by the presence at the head table today, I think I can say that the door appears open for greater discussion and I would certainly offer support in any way I can to keep the ball rolling.

And perhaps this collaboration is one effort where I could start moving towards as we enter this new year: 2008. Bringing people together of similar interests is by no means a new concept.

But something about having our voices of business, those who open their doors every day to the real world, be it commerce or service, having these groups commit to ‘visioning’ for our future success, would offer some important insight into what we as community leaders need to know and learn, so that we can be effective in our roles that include investing in key infrastructure and programs with our minds set on establishing an environment that will grow success; that will grow investment; that will grow our region.

And this encompasses the first points of my message to kick off 2008. To truly set a vision for our region we need to understand who we are and we need all of our neighbours to get to know one another. And I’ll simply start by stating the obvious, Kingsville is a great place to work, shop, dine, play and stay and soon we will be Hockeyville! And before there is a rush to the stage, I can easily echo these comments for all of our communities including Amherstburg, Essex, Lakeshore, LaSalle, Leamington, Tecumseh and Windsor. Did I mention though that Kingsville is still leading Hockeyville nation?

On a more serious note, I cannot highlight enough the value and opportunity that resides within our Essex County municipalities and our region. And how our region boasts such tremendous assets, that when we combine all of them together, there is no question how strong we can be when we are united.

I see today, the first week of January, as an important start to a new year. And as such we need to start anew and rediscover who we are, so that we can remind ourselves where we have been and how far we have come. If I were to ask any of you to name something from your municipality, from your business, or from your neighbourhood, I can imagine that it wouldn't take long to identify our strengths. Putting aside all else, I cannot accentuate just how important it is to refocus these strengths into an ultimate discussion of how our Essex County municipalities and our City of Windsor neighbours really have an incredible collection of treasures. These treasures (our most coveted assets), which have become our foundation, are those that we will need, and will rely on in continuing to build upon our franchise, (that is in progress).

Our franchise that is made up of all our communities, our businesses, our industry, our educational leaders and institutions, our governments, and our people—It is us, Windsor-Essex. It is WE (the W and the E).

As Warden, I am pleased to be here to speak to you about the County of Essex experience and the progress and promise that our communities of interest share as we head into this year. Having served in the Warden's Chair for a full year now, I have gained a greater insight on the importance of balancing multiple interests with much needed gains in our region that, at the end of the day, will deliver greater benefits to our businesses, our citizens and our communities.

Entering 2007 as the Warden for the first time, I was keenly aware of the expectations that were set in attempting to lead Essex County and our member municipalities into a new term. This challenge is one I accepted without hesitation and upon the condition that we move forward together. Together, with each municipality, with our business community, and with our citizens, this is how I see us living up to expectations and delivering progress, especially in economic times that significantly challenge us.

Working to meet expectations, I have seen some impressive changes, and more importantly for all of us, we have seen a County Council grow and develop into a stronger government with a greater level of respect and appetite for regional initiatives. Today, the voice of Essex County Council is being heard and recognized by our Provincial and Federal counterparts. Our region boasts a strong pair of Ontario Ministers in key Provincial Ministries. We are also home to a Deputy Speaker, whose voice and support for this region is one that we have seen come to the table, time and time again.

Having the ear and eyes of many of our local MPs, and MPPs has resulted in successes and positive gains that our County has since enjoyed. Important grant announcements and much needed funding for infrastructure and regional services are among the recent good news announcements for all of us as every municipality in this region has received new funding in one form or another. I will let our municipal leaders tell their own stories. But the point is, and I note the commitment and focus of many of our priorities are quite similar. We are all pushing ahead to renew our infrastructure in a way that is and will lead to strengthening our economy, and make our region attractive for new investments as well as assist in retaining those we currently have.

As we look ahead, there are many programs and services that we continue to focus on and seek continued communications with all of our elected representatives. In 2008, we are carrying forward initiatives at the County level that are meant to provide new and greater insight, more information as well as important service delivery review and models that best fit our County's structure and best serve our growing population.

Maintaining open lines of communications at all levels is most important as we continue to move forward. And in moving forward, there are some initiatives, programs and services from the County perspective that I would like to share with you today.

Economic Development – The reincarnation of the new look Windsor Essex Development Commission is completing its first full year. Yet the news and positive strides taking us in a forward position have been many for our region and it now represents significant promise for us in 2008.

News of Windsor-Essex region being the #1 small city area to invest in (FDI –Magazine 2007)

Strategies to support our Manufacturing, Tool, Die, & Mould sector

Employee training and supports for those facing layoffs, technological changes, and restructuring in our global market place

An Economic Summit held last August brought all sectors of our community together to retool and establish a new blueprint and go-forward direction for our region. Leaders from each sector have since been appointed to move the file forward. And it is these experts who in turn hope their knowledge will ‘pay it forward’ to help our region optimize our existing diversity and further help us promote who we are.

TOURISM: A new initiative

We are undergoing a metamorphosis for our tourism as a whole. By now, I’m certain many if not all of you recognize that there’s a new energy across Essex County that has many of our partners coming together to help tell our stories and open the door to all the assets and treasures that we have been pretty much been keeping to ourselves and for way too long.

We can be and we certainly are a ‘tourist trap’ that is ready to shine. One initiative that is underway at the Regional level and promising to have a county-wide impact: is a new tourism model: It is one that sees potential County benefits that would focus more on our: culture, festivals, theatres & community shows, recreation, wineries and our waterfront, heritage sites, museums, and eco-tourism: This all inclusive model would certainly play a lead where businesses, commerce and more would find benefit.

A focus to WE are Tourism is going to be, what I predict, a significant move forward for the County. Just like the rebirth of the Economic Development Commission, a new Regional Tourism Body, has great potential that we need to explore further. And it will take a greater outreach into our communities, our home towns and our backyards to truly make the initiative a successful venture. WE are already a premier destination here in Canada's beautiful South, so let's not be afraid to stand up and let the spotlight shine on us all. Afterall, the sun already does shine on us and a little more attention for our ever-growing wine region, agriculture and more; a little more attention and suddenly our hidden gems become a discovered treasure where we all can find some benefit.

Yet I recognize that it is going to take more than words alone to get the job done, as we need to embrace the will and desire of our businesses, our tourist operators and our residents, and translate this into some positive political will to get the job done.

I am certainly not hesitating to get this moving forward, and will commit a genuine effort to move forward. Because the underlying truth is that we are all part of this economic region that needs us to act in unity and in the context of today's global economy, we cannot think that we are in competition with our neighbouring municipalities – because when it comes to tourism we are not. If we truly put our minds to it and recognize the incredible efforts of the many volunteers and community organizations that dedicate priceless hours towards our individual festivals, special events and cultural celebrations, we owe it to them and to all of us to do this right. And when we succeed, we shall discover that we truly are a year-round destination that can bring visitors to us: be it Spring, Summer, Fall or Winter.

There have been a number of distractions in recent weeks as I prepared for this inaugural State of the County address. But that did not keep me from losing my focus on the importance of looking back to our history to find a message that can carry us forward. You see, it is in our history where I rediscovered the strength the County possesses when we are working towards a common goal. Our past has shown that we can work well together.

Today, we recognize that we continue to share common goals for this region. And I want to recognize Mayor Francis and members of his city council and all of our County municipalities for your leadership and continued efforts on our past success stories such as the Development Commission, and our joint partnership with the United Way on the 2-1-1 service. I vividly recall just a year ago, comments from Mayor Francis noting that the city is a willing partner and welcomes greater regional collaboration. The hand of partnership was extended to us back then and I do not hesitate to keep that door open as we look to strengthen our relationship because I believe we continue to share a mutual belief in the importance and value that a strong City, and a strong County make for a stronger region. I do remain an optimist, but recognize that it will take time and patience. And, it will take discipline to get the job done for our region.

The fact is, when I see so many of my fellow mayors in the audience, I know that we are here to serve a similar purpose for our communities of interest, and I think we all recognize that by working closely to strengthen our region, we are definitely a stronger force together than we are apart.

2008 is a great time to start making progress and communication will play a role in getting there. And it is time to bring all of us to the same table and discuss issues that our citizens are calling on us to work together: our border crossing, emergency services, social services, transit, tourism, regional corridors and more. And I will be calling upon our members to support an opportunity for more formalized meetings between the county and city councils this year.

At the County of Essex our upper tier level of municipal government continues to invest in our communities of interest. We're investing in roads, we're seeking to establish a back-bone for improved fibre networks to extend into our rural communities, and we're investing in emergency services to name but a few. Today, our county operates efficiently and provides visible and valuable services to our residents and to our municipal partners. Our distinct federation of seven municipalities is one that cares about service. Collectively we challenge ourselves, at practically every meeting, to explore all possibilities and even venture into unchartered territory as well as review previously chartered territory.

That's why we are reviewing how we provide Land Ambulance services and why we believe moving towards its consolidation into a single delivery model makes best and most efficient use of the tax dollars we collect. And whether the decision to proceed with a private or a public model at the end of the day, the effort itself remains based on providing a service to our residents that they can count on getting in times of their greatest need.

Also in 2008, we will continue to pursue the examination of various models and potential levels of transit service into Essex County. We also look to have an updated review of police services across our region. Again in an effort to provide all of us with information on the costs of delivering the service as a truly regional model, or a consolidated model or as a county force or if the status quo does represent the best delivery model for the significant investment that we all make in policing.

At the end of the day, it is the overarching theme of accountability at work, because the reality is that we cannot afford to just sit back in a traditional comfort zone. We can't say nothing more needs to be done, especially not in the face of the significant challenges that we live in today.

I cannot honestly tell how many times I have been approached, (whether by fellow council members, or by the business community, or by the media, or by our people) asking what are we doing to improve the economic environment we live in. The count is staggering I'm sure. But the real answer is that we, our communities, and our region are doing a lot and we are maintaining a focus on greater investment within our region.

We've set a course with our main priorities focused on making improvements to our vital infrastructure and all this is being done to help us remember who we are and where we are.

We are Essex County. Bounded on three sides by water, it is no surprise that our County enjoys a quality of life few locales in Canada can match. Recreational opportunities abound, with Pelee Island, the Point Pelee National Park, and Essex Region Conservation areas providing sandy beaches, unique to our region.

Our ideal climate has fostered a burgeoning wine industry, and award winning wines now identify Essex County as one of the premier wine producing areas in Ontario. I encourage you to take the "Vine to Wine" tour of our region's vineyards. Some of Essex County's wineries boast spectacular settings, rounding out wine tastings and culinary delights with breathtaking sunsets.

With such a lengthy growing season, it is only natural that Essex County is recognized as one of our Country's most important agricultural areas. On a latitude with Northern California, we have the longest growing season in Canada, supporting the largest concentration of greenhouse vegetable production in North America and still growing.

This is who we are and this is why we should all be proud of our Essex County. Thank you friends for your time and your commitment to this region and thank you for this opportunity to welcome each of you to Kingsville...our community playground.