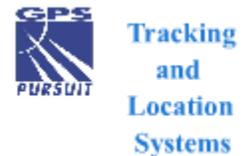




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Windsor Essex Development Commission hits the ground running

BY VERONIQUE MANDAL *Special to The Business Executive*



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I to r: Remo Mancini, Richard Florida, Matthew Fischer

WINDSOR — Windsor, Ontario may not be in the same economic league as boomtown, Alberta, but the city's fortunes may be about to change — due in large part to the Pied Piper determination of those in charge of the new

Windsor Essex Development Commission.

The fledgling WEDC rose from the ashes of a previous organization that had languished for more than a decade. During that time, Windsor — with the traditional boom and bust economy of a one-industry city — was enjoying its longest boom in history; lulling those in charge to believe that it could last well into the new century.

The “diversify or die” advice from years earlier was given lip service and not much else. The restructuring hammer of the “Big Three” auto companies — General Motors, Ford of Canada and DaimlerChrysler — hit the city with magnum force.

Windsor found itself with an auto industry in decline, a perceived militant labour force and suffering the country's highest unemployment rate.

In such times, a city turns to its economic development gurus for direction. But they had run out of sizzle.

With dire predictions of a catastrophic future, the chief administrative officers of the city and county began searching for a blue ribbon board of directors to lead a revamped organization. They wanted leaders who would be up to the Herculean task of changing the area's economic future.

It took more than a year, but they found a board of workers that includes the CEO of a major greenhouse exporting business, the CEO of a major natural resource utility, a university Dean of Business and a medical doctor who served as leader of Canada's doctors.

When it came to choosing a board chair, they persuaded former cabinet minister and entrepreneur Remo Mancini to lead the group. Hard working and fearless when having to make hard decisions, Mancini accepted, knowing the team he was leading on the board would be willing to meet the expectations he would inflict on himself.

Taking over a stagnant 50-year-old organization would prove to be quite a challenge.

“The organization had been good for its time, but it was past its prime, and we found ourselves starting from scratch. There was very little in the way of files and databases and it was evident we needed a revamped organization with a renewed mandate and fresh team members,” said Mancini.

“But before we started hiring, we had to put an infrastructure in place that would allow a new team to hit the ground running. Otherwise, they would be bogged down with putting processes in place and having to delay getting down to the business of regional economic development.”

Mancini and the board committed to taking the Windsor Development Commission in a regional direction — promoting Windsor and the County of Essex as a single entity. It was fortunate for them that both governments and their business leaders realized the urgency of marketing themselves as a region.

The search for a CEO was intense and extensive. But Mancini says one applicant stood out from the pack. Matthew Fischer is no lightweight in the field of economic development. The 30-year veteran in his field is an entrepreneur and expert in community economic analysis and strategic planning and

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marketing for foreign investment.

Fischer has guided economic development in cities across Ontario and served as Consul and Senior Investment Advisor at the Canadian Consulate in Los Angeles, California.

Within weeks of his arrival, Fischer rolled out an aggressive 120-day priority plan. New staff included Michael Burton as vice president and director of corporate services and communications, a role Fischer saw as vital to a 21st Century economic development team.

Fischer, having previously been hired by the City of Windsor as a consultant, said he was prepared for the challenge. His 120-day plan included an economic development summit in August.

“Windsor may be going through a radical change because of a redirection and realignment of the auto industry, but everything that made the region a success is still here,” said Fischer. “The amazing turnout of business leaders and leaders in the health, education, labour and agriculture fields is an indication of the commitment people here have to the future of the region.”

The summit featured the internationally renowned guru of new and innovative economic development theories, Richard Florida, who now teaches at the University of Toronto. The gregarious and affable author of *Rise of the Creative Class* and *Flight of the Creative Class*, is also bullish on the Windsor Essex region.

“Windsor-Detroit is part of the second-largest mega-region in the world,” said Florida. “Developing a binational economic development strategy is critical, and economic success goes to those places which are “open to immigrants, artists, gays, writers, engineers and anyone who could be considered creative.”

Ideas generated by the summit include establishing a research and development centre for health technology and starting an Angel Network to generate entrepreneurial investment. **TBE**