

Living and working in Sarnia Lambton

A NextGen green paper*

*We borrowed this from the political playbook; a green paper implies ideas or solutions or strategies but at the proposition stage only. A green paper is meant to **stimulate discussion**. We certainly hope this one does.

This green paper produced by:



On **May 17, 2010** a small group of 20- and 30-something-year-olds got together to chat about life and work in Sarnia Lambton.

Some of us are married, some of us are dating, and some of us are single. Some of us have never left Sarnia. Some of us were born and raised in Sarnia, went away to school and chose to come back. Some of us are from other small towns or big cities but have found ourselves in Sarnia for various reasons. Some of us have been here our whole lives and others just recently arrived. Some of us can't imagine living anywhere but here and then there are those of us who are already planning on moving.

We got together because there is a need in the community to have the **next generation's perspective** heard. There are numerous planning initiatives underway and we felt it was worth at least trying to put down our own perspective – not the perspective of the established leadership who, while they've been doing an outstanding job, are likely to retire over the next five to 10 years.

We don't pretend that this paper captures our entire generation's perspective – it wasn't done in a scientific way. Rather we hope this paper acts as a starting point for the better inclusion of the next generation in the community engagement process as well as offering local employers, decision-makers, and marketers an inside perspective on how a small slice of Sarnia is thinking about living and working here. Maybe it motivates more of our generation to get involved to help make change. And maybe, just maybe, it finds its way into the hands of someone who is thinking of moving, and it convinces them that living and working in Sarnia really can be fun.

This is a snippet of what we had to say.

Living in Sarnia Lambton

THE AMENITIES...

Going out to socialize

If you are over 21 but not yet married with kids, there are few decent places to dine and drink, especially downtown. While there are a number of bars to 'party' at, these don't necessarily appeal to those of us who want a night out in a space with atmosphere and filled with others in the same age bracket.

Going out to eat

It seems like Sarnia is still very much a lunch box city. Ethnic eating – from Thai to Lebanese to Indian and Japanese – is desired but there are limited choices. Or the choices are hard to find (for example, there are a number of home-based ethnic catering companies but you learn about these through word of mouth). Our population isn't diverse so why would our restaurants be? And yet so many of our palettes have diversified and we'd love to have the choice. Buffets and chain restaurants still seem to dominate. The finer dining establishments are considered too expensive for the 'lunch box' crowd. For those at our meeting, most of us make a point of eating out at least twice a month. But we understand the challenge to start up a new place here as not enough people our age live in Sarnia to sustain a restaurant or even stick around on weekends to go out.

Going out to shop

Simply put, there isn't enough here to satisfy a young woman's closet desires: clothes, handbags, shoes. Women tend to either drive one-hour to the malls and boutiques in London, or regularly go across the border to the malls at Birch Run, Sommerset, Partridge Creek or even the mall in Port Huron. There is sentiment that if you are shopping in Sarnia, you have to settle for women's and men's wear. The availability of quality clothing is

limited but at the same time, those few boutiques which are opening up, are 'pricey.' Feel like Sarnia gets the 'leftovers' when it comes to shopping destinations.

Going downtown

It is getting better, compared to 10 years ago. But that isn't apparent to new residents. It still seems like it is really struggling. Do we have to wait another 10 years to watch its next development milestone? Over the next couple of months, a number of key, large storefronts are going to be closing up shop. More empty storefronts? How can the city attract bigger retailers to invest in the downtown? Take a look at what's been done to revitalize uptown Waterloo...

THE PRICE PARADIGM...

Buying local – supporting small, niche businesses

Sarnia is a very price-sensitive place to do business. If we think about restaurants and shopping – that retail space – people demand low prices even though the quality may be the same. While prices here – from a wage perspective and a real estate perspective – are a fraction of what they are in London or Toronto, it is still a detriment to a small business owners' sustainability. Does our 'Walmart' mentality compromise the amenities of a cultural downtown that our generation wants?

Where does this price-sensitive outlook come from? Is it possible that those who haven't left Sarnia don't know what to compare prices to and hence, complain about costs the most? That those of us who have left and lived in other places know what to expect and therefore find Sarnia prices reasonable? If we aren't exposed to different things, won't it be impossible to recognize the difference between price and quality?

Going to the beach

Water, water, water. The proximity to hanging out on the beach, to boating and sailing, is our community's biggest asset. To think people in Toronto have to fight hours of weekend traffic to go north when it is at our doorstep. You can literally leave work and be on the water in 20 minutes or less.

Going to events

While there are limitations in shopping and dining options, when spring and summer hit, there are great events to be had. Bayfest. What can we say? It's an event that draws us in and encourages us to invite our friends to town. Artwalk is another fantastic event that promotes our cultural capacity and downtown. We only touched upon two, but there are numerous others...

Finding hidden gems

Sarnia can be that kind of community where it is about finding a hidden gem. Because some assets – like the Sarnia's Farmer Market or Purdy's Fish Shop – aren't very well 'marketed' or promoted, it can take time to find them. It is usually through word of mouth or just simply coincidence that you are able to find what you are looking for.

GETTING AROUND...

By bike

For those of us who believe riding a bike is not only economical or environmental or pleasurable, we see how getting around on one in the city is tricky. Sure the bike paths in Canatara Park are beautiful, but have you ever tried getting to the park? There is no system to link it to downtown – namely along Venetian Boulevard – or other areas of interest.

By bus

We think we are all lucky. We have access to cars. We can't imagine what it is like to have to rely upon public transit because our impression is that it is next to impossible to get exactly where you need to get to. For those of us choosing to live in communities like Bright's Grove or Corunna, we have to own a car because there aren't reliable public transport options. When we think about our experiences in other cities and towns, there is a growing sense that taking public transit is actually a smart, environmental choice. In Sarnia, there is still a stigma attached to taking transit – that you must just not be able to afford a car.

COMMUNITY IMAGE

Out darn spot, out

Our dear city is still fighting against a negative, high-profile image of a dirty city. This doesn't do anything to help attract and keep young people and families growing up in a generation where green is good. We acknowledge 'the hand that feeds us' – the large refining and petrochemical companies – and their efforts to work in collaboration with environmental organizations and standards, but that message just isn't getting out beyond Sarnia itself.

We wonder why the message of how Sarnia is changing, isn't getting out more, or who keeps recreating the myth? Maybe it's those who haven't been back in a long time. It's hard to understand our community's potential if you've been away for years.

Close-knit community

For those of us who went away to school and then to work, we found we gravitated towards other people from Sarnia. We stayed close and continued to maintain friendships. It was a connection – maybe like that East Coast connection – that we didn't always see in the relationships among people from bigger cities.

That close-knit feeling is also true if you are an outsider trying to break into Sarnia – it seems that it really is all about who you know in Sarnia and if you aren't in, then it can be that much tougher.

If you are from Sarnia and you have family here, it is a great place to come back to work and raise a family – because it is so affordable – and at the same time you still have access to larger cities in both Canada and the U.S. What drives most of us to be here is for personal reasons rather than career ones.

That sense of a small community also seems to translate into how the community sticks together to 'get things done'. It is seen in the network of community services as well as in a low crime rate.

If you can be patient, Sarnia Lambton will take care of you.

Working in Sarnia Lambton

Finding a job

For those of us who are unemployed, or thinking about getting out of the job, it is hard to figure out what jobs are available in Sarnia – without having your mom call your aunt who calls her brother-in-law who knows someone at this plant. One of us had strong feelings that while some employers and community leaders talk about needing to keep youth employed here, they don't actually step up to do it.

One of the trickier elements about finding a job in Sarnia Lambton is exactly how a jobseeker goes about looking for a job. Sure, there are the Service Ontario websites and federal job boards but those often list lower-income/entry level jobs and not necessarily professional ones. If you look at bigger city centres, there tend to be multiple online job sites – there isn't an awareness of where someone would look in Sarnia.

We also wondered if some employers are perhaps not as tech savvy to search out online job posting sites. We were told about LiveInLambton.ca – it seems like a good concept – but none of us have heard of it. For a young grad, the immediate place to look for a job is online but there seems to be a lack of understanding on the part of employers that this is where we look. In Sarnia, it seems like it still dominated by family connections, word of mouth and internal postings.

Networking

We should take a look at the London, Ontario program – **Student 2 Business Networking event** – as a model for connecting students and recent grads to employers to learn about co-ops, soft skills training, and jobs that are available.

Recruitment

There seems to be a gap however in that employers – especially those who run their own companies – have a bit of a “what do I get out of it?” attitude. They invest time and money into student recruitment only to have them leave after one or two years. One of the driving forces behind youth retention seems to be – at least for some of the smaller engineering firms – that ‘price sensitivity’ mentioned earlier. Recent grads are pulled to cities like London and Toronto because they can make more money there (even though cost of living is more expensive).

One possible recruitment approach that could potentially be modeled by other industries is the one used to attract and retain physicians. Part of the attraction efforts include showcasing those few local gems that appeal to a younger demographic – such as lunch at Limbo and dinner at Lola's – to help counteract some of the stereotypes they may hold about Sarnia Lambton if they are originally from here. It's a concerted effort to show them that Sarnia can be fun; this was reiterated a couple of times, that **Sarnia actually can be fun**. That's a tougher and more costly approach for smaller firms and there isn't any head-hunting firm in Sarnia to help small business owners out on that front.

The issue of youth attraction and retention is only going to be exacerbated because we can all anticipate the massive retirements that are due to come online in the next several years. It will require a hard pitch to grads living in university towns to get them to come to Sarnia – because that pitch has got to be in a positive light.

There seemed to be a consensus that Sarnia Lambton doesn't necessarily have great salaries for young people but it is a great community to raise a family.

Training locally

While there may be recognition among larger employers about the training programs that are available at Lambton College, we still associate many of Lambton's technical programs with the petrochemical sector. For example, if a local engineering company needed to hire a civil engineer or civil engineering technologist, they would have to automatically look to non-Lambton schools. If there are updated program offerings, there is a gap in informing small and medium-sized enterprises.

Be your own boss

Many of us have found that the best way to make it work is to start your own company; to be that entrepreneur. The Chamber of Commerce and other community organizations give lots of support in learning how to start your own business.

The benefits of working in a small community

Once you get over the hurdle of employment and get established, the community does offer us a great work – life balance, namely because we aren't fighting commuter traffic. Its size actually allows you to network easily with other professionals, connect and for those of us in sales and business, and build personal relationships with our clients quite easily. There are genuine mentorship opportunities available – again, it can be a matter of finding them but they are there.

A laundry list of potential priorities

IN NO PARTICULAR ORDER...

- Local government and government-funded stakeholders need to improve how they communicate – especially when it comes to online tools.
- It seems like there is quite a gap between the lifestyle satisfaction in Sarnia among new grads (21 – 28 year olds) and young professional couples thinking about starting a family (or already there) (28 – 35 year olds). Local efforts to attract ‘youth’ should really focus on one of the two markets – not both because they require different amenities.
- We need to get better at marketing ourselves and our community. It relates to the point above – who is it that we really want to attract to our community – and coordinating those efforts. And we have a responsibility as well, as the NextGen, to confront and challenge and dispel those stereotypes so many of our friends have taken with them when they moved from Sarnia but haven’t learned that this place has changed. We mean, is Sarnia even on Facebook? But it shouldn’t be someone creating a page that doesn’t truly understand social media – it should be someone who themselves is an active social media guru and tapped into the community at the same time.
- Can employers communicate better as to what jobs are actually available in the community – there needs to be a single-source online tool for finding professional opportunities. Perhaps this is the **LiveInLambton.ca** portal but it needs better marketing.

- Find a better way to connect employers with potential employees and explore work arrangements that guarantee a new hire's commitment to a company; SMEs in particular need financial resources to help them improve their recruitment and retention practices.
- Is there a way we can improve how employers understand and work with new graduates to improve their transition into the workforce, help them network and develop their careers? Managers need to learn how to manage grads who may be 'smarter' when it comes to technology, marketing and strategy. Are employers inviting their recent, young hires to community events and networking opportunities? It is a simple thing to bring their young staff out to Chamber events but few are doing it.
- One approach we think has a lot of untapped potential is for employers to be engaging and interacting with high school students before they leave to pursue education in other cities. This way they know what to expect and potentially have a reason to come back. It is about planting the seed early about the real opportunities that are here, and that they can be successful and happy if they choose to come back to Sarnia after graduation.
- One potential, and again untapped, recruitment approach is to position a career opportunity as just that – a desirable opportunity – rather than just simply 'work'. Our generation wants a better work-life balance but at the same time is results-driven as opposed to needing to clock in at nine-to-five. We want flexible work arrangements but we are willing to perform to ensure that when we do work, it is results-based.
- As the NexGen, we need to make changes ourselves and learn to be happy about living and working in Sarnia Lambton. Initiatives like Sarnia Connects are the types of improvements we need to continue to support. We also need to step up and support the restaurants and stores which are here that we like, especially the ones downtown.

What next?

As mentioned, one of our hopes with this green paper is that it will stimulate discussion. To that end, we will be distributing it across our networks, to get it on the desks of our colleagues and of current leadership. Again, we can't promise that it will necessarily generate immediate results but at we see it as a first step in documenting some of the NextGen's perspectives on living and working in Sarnia Lambton.

One of the biggest challenges is moving forward. We need someone who will engage current leadership and the NextGen to move action forward. If we as the NextGen have identified issues and challenges, it is also part of our responsibility to try to hold up our own end of the discussion, to try to promote the skills and ideas and solutions we can bring to the table, to help create an impact statement for our generation. It isn't enough to have just one NextGen leader at the table, you need a group with force.

Who to contact

This NextGen green paper was a mid-stage outcome of the Labour Market Partnership Project – or **Workforce 2020: Fuelling tomorrow's talent** – a research project aimed at helping the Sarnia Lambton community better prepare to meet its future human resource requirements. The Labour Market Partnership Project, funded by Employment Ontario, was managed by the **Sarnia Lambton Workforce Development Board**.

Sarnia Connects, our community's premiere social networking group for young professionals, was integral in this green paper's inception. The Sarnia Lambton Workforce Development Board approached Sarnia Connects to tap into their members' insights; Sarnia Connects targeted and invited participants, and facilitated the discussion which resulted in this paper.

For more information, please contact:

Scott Palko, Founder of Sarnia Connects, and President of local marketing firm - CCI Studios:

Tel: (519) 337-8837

Email: spalko@ccistudios.com