

Can't-do attitude

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OK. I get it. Now I understand way more clearly why the strategic geniuses of Toyota Inc. built a giant assembly plant in Cambridge, Ont., but wouldn't dream of investing a dime in Windsor.

After hearing Rick Haldenby, director of the University of Waterloo school of architecture, describe how Cambridge, a city of 120,000 which straddles Highway 401 east of Kitchener, moved heaven and earth to secure that \$27-million campus, I wanted to pack up and move there myself.

Haldenby, who spoke Tuesday night to about 130 concerned Windsorites and a lot of empty seats in the cavernous armouries, told an inspiring story about an engaged, united and visionary community that understood how much a world-renowned university campus could mean to its struggling downtown and made it happen.

The contrast between Cambridge, where people rolled up their sleeves, wrote cheques and got it done in short order, and Windsor, where the university seemingly doesn't understand the role it could and should play in this community, and where the public remains largely indifferent, is stark and painful.

Maybe the difference is that Cambridge, created through a forced marriage of the attractive city of Galt, once known as the "Manchester of Canada" for its massive textile industry, and the photogenic neighbouring towns of Preston and Hespeler, never forgot the slap in the face it took in the 1950s when it was left out of the postwar rush to open new Ontario universities, including two 30 kilometres away in rival Waterloo.

With its textile industry dead and its core area battered by floods in 1974 and ravaged by subsequent flood-control measures, Cambridge's movers and shakers spent years looking for a miracle. They kicked around proposals, ranging from an Imax theatre to a textile museum, that would have been chronic drains on the public purse.

And then, on Nov. 3, 2000, a chamber of commerce executive asked a fateful question of Haldenby at a public meeting: "What will it take to move the school of architecture to Cambridge?" The not-so-facetious answer? "A great site and lots of money."

PERFECT SITE

The town elders weren't the least bit fazed. They knew they had the perfect site, a historic former silk mill overlooking the Grand River, and they were dead confident the money could be raised.

Things immediately started falling into place. A bumbling mayor retired. Her gung-ho replacement, who beat a rival by 16 votes in a recount, immediately declared that "architecture is the future of this city." In a mere 83 days a memorandum of understanding was hammered out that involved a \$7.5-million contribution from city taxpayers, later increased to \$9 million.

And the community? Instead of whining about the cost, people stepped up. The homebuilders association raised \$250,000. The car dealers association forked over \$125,000. Local dentists -- dentists, for crying out loud -- raised another \$125,000. A local company donated a \$200,000 projector. Other firms donated concrete, marble and hardwood. Everyone wanted a piece of making "their campus" happen. Donations reached an astonishing \$40 per square foot for a 100,000-square-foot project.

"There was a huge level of community buy-in," said Haldenby, and that's one of the keys to making it happen. He knew Cambridge was totally on board when a senior citizen -- and seniors are traditionally the toughest spending critics -- was booed at a seniors' gathering for slamming city hall's contribution.

On Sept. 13, 2004, nine months from the start of construction, this riverfront showplace welcomed its first students. The payback, for Cambridge and the school, has been remarkable. It includes 800 new or refurbished housing units in the once-derelict core. An area where you couldn't get a cappuccino now boasts six such establishments. There's always something interesting happening downtown, courtesy of 350 creative, fun-loving minds. The boost in tax revenues exceeds the city's phased contributions. And the school, which has made headlines around the world, now attracts the nation's best talent, with applications soaring from 600 to 2,000 for 72 first-year openings.

I listened to Haldenby and it made me sick with envy that our university, unlike the can-do folks at St. Clair College, can only come with lame excuses for not becoming a community partner in the revival of our dying downtown.

Cambridge residents dug deep to make their dream a reality. Here, I suspect, the primary form of "buy-in" would be bellyaching from the usual suspects about public money being squandered.

Little wonder we have neither dreams nor visions. Just nightmares.

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