

Robert Lawn returns to head Prescott Chamber

Posted By Nick Gardiner, Staff Writer

Encouraging co-operation among South Grenville businesses and municipalities is imperative in the current state of global economic uncertainty, says the new president of the Prescott and District Chamber of Commerce.

"If we are to succeed in difficult economic times, co-operation is needed," said Robert Lawn, who was acclaimed at the chamber's annual general meeting Wednesday afternoon at the Bridgeview Restaurant.

Brent Laton, Grenville County's trustee on the Catholic District School Board of Eastern Ontario, was elected vice-president.

Lawn, a former Prescott mayor, principal of South Grenville District High School (SGDHS) and chairman of the board at Brockville General Hospital, held the same position with the chamber in 2000.

But this time around, concern about the global economy is weighing heavily on the community, he said.

"I'm hesitant to say we're heading for a major economic breakdown. But things don't look bright."

Still, "giving up" is not an option, he said.

Lawn noted the chamber agreed Wednesday to send a letter of support to Riverside Pontiac Buick, the only new car dealership in town, which is feeling the fallout of problems in North America's automotive manufacturing industry.

"They're caught in this as well. Their business is predicated on the car manufacturers staying in business," said Lawn.

He said the chamber is hoping to arrange a meeting with Riverside "as a gesture of goodwill and support" and noted the dealership generates spin-off business in the area that also needs protection.

Despite what he feels are short-term challenges facing many sectors of the business community, Lawn is encouraged by the projections of some analysts who believe a recovery may begin before the end of 2009.

Moreover, he suggested the broad sense of optimism that greeted the election of U.S. President Barack Obama may provide "a bit of hope" for a turnaround in the global economy.

Lawn has a long history with the chamber, joining in the late 1960s when he was a teacher at SGDHS. At that time, the school served 1,400 students and had 100 staff including 84 teachers and then-principal Russell McNeill suggested it should be represented by Lawn at the chamber.

Lawn's membership lapsed later when he was transferred out of the school, but he rejoined later with his wife Sandra Lawn, who also served as the town's mayor, through her consulting business.

Heather Lawless, chairman of the chamber's nominating committee, said they approached Robert Lawn about the position because of the wealth of experience he brings to the job.

"We were really looking for a leader who has great knowledge of the community and passion for the community and he has both," said Lawless, who is executive director of the Grenville Community Development Corporation.

In a normal year, the president's chair would be filled by the vice-president, said Lawless.

However, then-vice-president Mike Martel took over the presidency last year when Mary Lou Murray of the Royal Bank was transferred out of South Grenville.

Martel, who runs Mortgage Alliance, said he has started online studies at Seneca College and couldn't maintain the commitment required for the job in 2009.

Martel said the 140-member chamber supports Lawn and recognizes the valued experience he brings to the position.

"The chamber is very happy about it. (Lawn) has been a real servant to the community for so many years."

Martel said he's seen little evidence of the global economic meltdown having an immediate effect in South Grenville except in terms of the threat to the Riverside car dealership.

Otherwise, the opening of the GreenField Ethanol plant at Johnstown and continuing strength of the Port of Prescott - as well as the expectation the port is in line for a major infrastructure project to repair wharves - bodes well for the region, he said.

"There are some interesting things happening."

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