

More and more businesses attracted to city's forward-thinking approach

Columns

By JODI SZIMANSKI

Posted December 13, 2010

The City of Stratford has a goal: the Top Seven list by the Intelligent Community Forum (ICF). In October, it was named as one of The Smart21 -- the 21 most intelligent communities in the world for 2011. Stratford developed a vision for the future with an economic revitalization plan to diversify its economic development portfolio to include digital media and it has worked tirelessly to make that vision a reality.

The city has already seen the benefits of being named to the list. Since the designation, more people, and more importantly for economic development, more businesses are taking notice of Stratford. The city receives more relocation inquiries than it did before. A group from the Canadian Consulate in New York City working on ICT investment has been in contact with Mayor Dan Mathieson regarding trade talks.

This year's theme is health care. Eight percent of family doctors in the community securely access patient records on broadband e- health portals via city fibre and WiFi, even during house calls. As the regional hospital for this part of the province, Stratford General Hospital recently received a \$65- million digitally advanced and networked wing boasting the largest PACS digital radiology data centre in Canada. This has helped Stratford better the health care it offers its citizens and lays the groundwork to place high in the ICF rankings.

For a small city with a large rural population, this is a great accomplishment. Stratford is the smallest city competing for the Top Seven. The city is competing with communities as large as Birmingham in the U.K. with one million people and Shanghai and Chongqing in China with populations of 19 million and 32 million respectively.

Mathieson says that "Stratford has done a great job at using technology and broadband access to enable businesses, citizens and the products and services they provide to be the most widely used and accessible. This has opened business opportunities to use technology to be more efficient and sell more."

It's the number of small businesses doing big things with broadband that make the difference for Stratford. The mayor has reached out to the business community to find out how its members use technology and how it enables them to be more accessible and cutting edge.

Two themes keep reoccurring in the company responses: companies moving their national centres to Stratford and globalization. Take the RBC data centre that's moving to Stratford from Toronto, and other small businesses that have been able to take on global projects from their offices in Stratford because of broadband access.

There are more stories out there. And the city wants to hear about them. Mathieson asks: "Look at your life -- how does broadband access and technology improve your quality of life, how do you use it at work to improve your product and service and how does it set Stratford apart? Then do it."

And if you're already doing it, tell David Hicks of Pensario who's developing The Top Seven application (david@pensario.ca). Mathieson believes that "if we foster a culture of believing everyone can make a difference. Stratford will be honoured with the title Intelligent Community of the Year."

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Article ID# 2886746