Chamber releases third BR+E survey results

By Ashleigh Viveiros

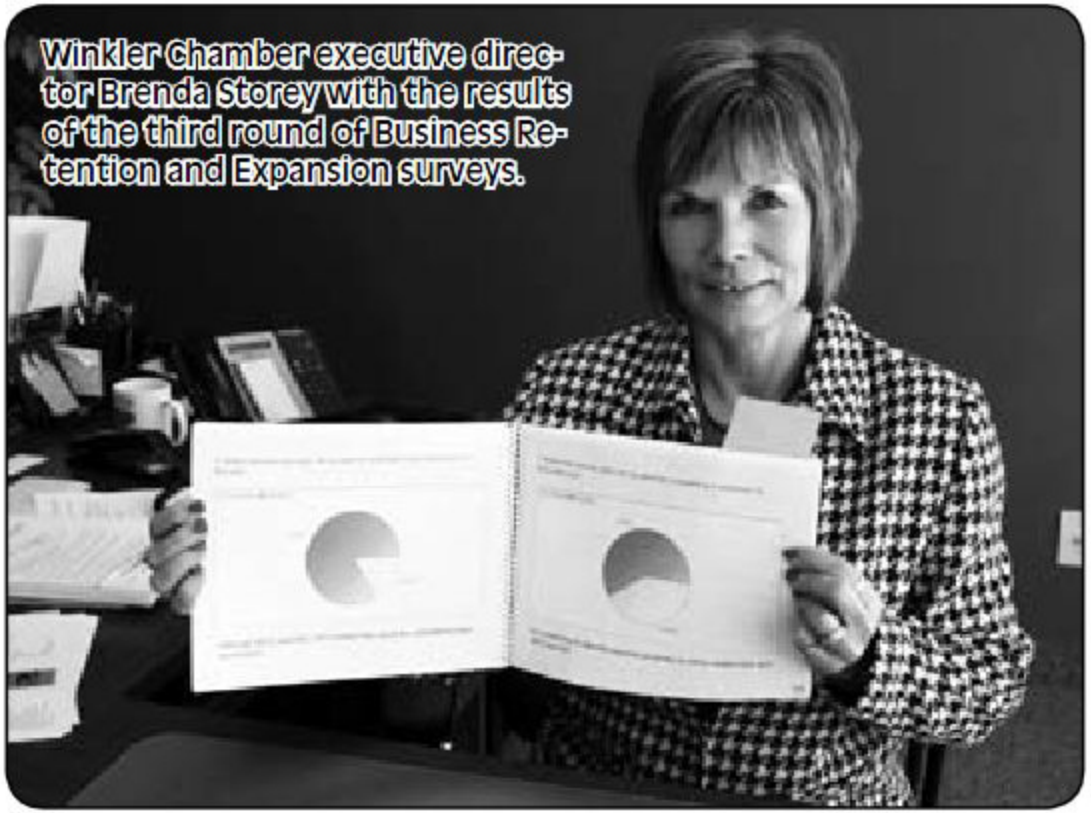
There weren't a lot of surprises in the Winkler and District Chamber of Commerce's third round of Business Retention and Expansion surveys, but the data collected from local businesses will still serve to bolster the Chamber's advocacy in the years ahead, said executive director Brenda Storey.

The Chamber presented the results of its latest round of BR+E surveys to the 100 participating businesses on Monday, having already shared the information with Winkler city council the week before.

The extensive survey outlines what this group of businesses - made up of a mix of retail, construction, agriculture, and a few other sectors - has to say about the challenges and benefits of operating in Winkler, as well as the things they'd like to see accomplished in the future, said Storey.

The report can be boiled down into five key recommendations, Storey said.

The first is that area businesses desperately want to see a new multi-purpose community centre/convention centre built in the Winkler area.



Winkler Chamber executive director Brenda Storey with the results of the third round of Business Retention and Expansion surveys.

Sixty-four out of the 100 businesses surveyed listed this as a concern, noting Winkler needs a place it can hold conventions, trade shows, community events, weddings, and a wider range of sports programs.

That's been a consistent theme in the surveys of the last few years, Storey said.

Also consistent has been the sense that such a facility should perhaps be a regional project, undertaken with the support of the Town of Morden and the RM of Stanley, she said.

"So we might want to put our work toward this type of a facility and, in the bigger picture, work with our neighbours on a multi-purpose community centre," she said.

The second recommendation deals with traffic problems in Winkler.

Although the twinning of Hwy. 32 certainly got its fair share of mentions, businesses also pointed out that the overall traffic flow throughout the city needs to be better addressed, Storey said.

This includes problems such as congestion on Main St. by Tim Hortons, the need for a truck route around Winkler to lower the number of semi-trailers clogging up streets within the city, better turning lanes by the Southland Mall, the need for a light at the corner of 15th St. and Hwy. 32, among other issues.

"We would never step on the city's toes," when it comes to addressing these concerns, Storey said, but the Chamber hopes this information will help guide council as it decides which problem areas to address.

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Convention centre, traffic flows among key issues

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The third recommendation encompasses the broad topic of shopping in Winkler, including suggestions for more variety in clothing stores, better customer shopping initiatives to draw people to Winkler, making it easier for pedestrians to get to the Hwy. 14 box stores by putting in safer sidewalks and crossings, and many overall improvements to the Southland Mall shopping experience.

The fourth recommendation deals with business growth and mentorship to businesses.

Here, businesses expressed a desire for regional thinking, detailed city planning, public transit, improved infrastructure to attract new businesses, the addition of food services in the industrial park area, and more business mentorship.

"We'd really like to draw on the Winkler-Stanley Economic Development board for that," Storey said of mentorship. "Those gentlemen are experienced business folks and we know that they could help out a lot."

The final recommendation covers a gamut of topics, ranging from the need for better internet service, more low-cost housing, increased daycare spaces, more activities for local youth, and increased local trades training options and customer service seminars, among others.

The need for more skilled labourers and customer service workshops is something the Chamber has already been hard at work on, Storey noted.

The Chamber continues to work with Apprenticeship Manitoba in the hopes of bringing more training to the area.

Right now, the province does send out training co-ordinators several times a year to meet with current and prospective local tradespeople, Storey said.

As for customer service, 2010 saw several very successful workshops held by the Chamber, and even more are planned for this year, she said.

None of these recommendations come as news to the Chamber, as most of the ideas and comments mentioned in the surveys match nicely with the previous two rounds, Storey said.

"We're most pleased with this last survey because it seems to provide some more continuity," Storey said. "The flow is the same - the (business) leaders are all speaking from the same page."

Still, the data gives weight to the Chamber's position as it approaches local leaders to try and get some these projects underway, she said.

And that is the next step for the Chamber, Storey said.

"We now have to look at each recommendation and determine what are the action plans, the timelines, the sources of funding," she said. "This is not something the (Chamber) executive can handle on their own ... this is something that we need to bring lots of players together to do."

Some recommendations will take years to see through to fruition; others can be solved with a few simple phone calls and a little elbow grease, Storey said.

"Out of these recommendations, there's lots that can be done with hardly any effort at all," she said, pointing, in example, to the concerns the business community has about the run-down look of parts of Main St., which could be remedied with a bit of sprucing up by area businesses and the city.

"The best thing that we can do as a Chamber now is to get to work," Storey said, noting there are no plans to begin the fourth round of surveys anytime soon.

Survey #3 - by the numbers

- 95 per cent of businesses surveyed had no plans to relocate the businesses within the next two years. Of those that are, most planned to stay within the community.
- 40 per cent of businesses said they planned to expand their operations in Winkler in the next few years, leading to an increased workforce and additional services and product lines.
- 42 per cent listed the cost of leasing space as a disadvantage to doing business in Winkler.
- 45 per cent said the lack of access to training facilities in the area was also a disadvantage.
- 50 per cent believed the number of employees at their company would increase in the next two years.
- businesses listed several factors as barriers to new businesses coming to town, including: lack of housing, high taxes, inadequate labour supply, availability of space for rent or lease, lack of proactive new business recruitment, resistance from local businesses, need for a high-speed internet line, inadequate transportation, availability of properly zoned land, and lack of serviced land.
- 56 per cent of businesses said they were "very/somewhat dissatisfied" with the recreational facilities in the community; 84 per cent were unhappy with Hwy. 32.
- a few community strengths lauded by those surveyed included the fact that people in Winkler are hardworking, progressive, forward-looking, and entrepreneurs at heart.
- on the flip side, weaknesses listed included a lack of skilled labour, lack of personal touch when it comes to customer service, and a lack of community promotions.