

Local Immigration Forum

Wednesday February 15 – 8:30 A.M. Grand Gardens North

[AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY]

Good morning everyone. I'm very happy to be here today to open the 2017 Immigration Forum and to bring you greetings on behalf of the Office of Mayor and Sault Ste. Marie City Council.

I'd like to begin by thanking the Local Immigration Partnership for once again organizing this annual forum. It's wonderful to have an event like this that is free of charge and open to everyone.

I'd also like to thank the presenters who will be speaking and leading activities today, in particular our keynote speakers, Debbie Douglas of the Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants, and Inspector Scott Hlady of the Ontario Provincial Police. I'd also like to acknowledge our hosts here at Grand Gardens North for providing the venue for this year's forum.

Most of all though, I'd like to thank everyone in the audience who has chosen to attend the forum today. Your participation is very important and I am glad you have made the time in your schedules to be here.

The theme of this year's forum is "Diversity is our Destiny" and in my estimation it's a timely theme for our community, for a couple of reasons.

The first reason is simply that it's already starting to happen. The Sault is becoming more diverse and more pluralistic. I have an example from just a few days ago. For the past several years, the ACCANO group has been hosting a celebration dinner each February in honour of Black History Month.

The first dinner began as just a small potluck. At the 2017 event which took place this past Saturday, there were more than 300 people in attendance at the Machine Shop. That's some remarkable growth.

I was honoured to be able to attend and speak at the dinner. And if you were in attendance on Saturday night, this next part of my address is going to sound a little familiar.

The second reason why I agree with the notion that Diversity is our Destiny is because we really have no other rational choice than to embrace it as such. It's not just because doing so sounds like a nice thing to do, it's because we have to for several important economic and demographic reasons.

If you followed the news last week, you probably saw the story that the 2016 census is out and Sault Ste. Marie's population has dipped again. While this is certainly not the type of news most of us like to hear, it should hardly come as a surprise. We have an aging population and a low birth rate. If our community's dynamics don't change, it's likely that we're going to see further declines in our population.

One of those dynamics that needs to change is that we have to start attracting more newcomers to our community. Many of those newcomers will likely be immigrants or new Canadians. Many will be visible minorities.

A Sault Ste. Marie that returns to a population of 80,000 people is going to look much different than the Sault Ste. Marie we have today. And it is not going to look like the Sault Ste. Marie of 1990 either.

But it's important to note: acknowledging that reality isn't going to be enough to bring it to pass.

I realize this is going to sound redundant, but if we want to be a place where people choose to live, we have to offer the sort of environment that will make people want to live here. And part of that is attitudinal—it means being a welcoming and inclusive place, where people of diverse backgrounds can picture themselves making their homes.

We know that there is work to do in this regard. I've heard from people during our community consultations who say that they have had a difficult time integrating into our community.

We know that there are people who subscribe to small-minded beliefs and attitudes. We know that there have been some unfortunate and hurtful incidents directed at religious and cultural minorities in our community, including recently.

Our City is hardly alone or exceptional in dealing with these problems. But the fact that such problems exist elsewhere doesn't mean we should tolerate or accept them happening here.

If we want to be a growing, prosperous City, we have to consciously strive to become a more diverse place and then embrace that diversity. That means taking the time to learn from each other and to celebrate with each other.

We know we have more work to do. But that shouldn't take away from the fact that there is already great work being done.

To that point, I'd like to thank groups like the Local Immigration Partnership and their Council for their tireless efforts to build a welcoming community.

I'd like to thank the Sault Community Career Centre and the New to the Sault program for all of their work helping newcomers to integrate. I also want to thank the Career Centre and their network of volunteers for all of their work supporting government assisted refugees and also to the church groups and donors who have banded together to privately sponsor refugees.

We have a considerable number of refugees settled in the City now, and that's a really tremendous thing. I had the opportunity to be at the airport a few weeks ago to greet an incoming refugee family from the Congo. It was an extremely special and touching moment.

I'd like to thank all of the cultural groups and associations who are working to increase awareness and cross-cultural understanding. I'd like to acknowledge the work of everyone involved in positive events like Passport to Unity.

There are great things happening and as a City, we want to continue to build off of them.

So before I go, I have one quick plug to make. Because you are all here and because I know you are all engaged and civically-minded I encourage you to take a few minutes when you have the time and visit [Future SSM dot com](http://FutureSSM.com).

We have a number of videos and fact sheets that lay out the current state of the community—and you'll see that we are quite open about what our challenges and issues are. We're looking for feedback and ideas from the community about what they feel needs to happen for the City to have a brighter future. We'd certainly love to hear from you.

Thank you again for having me and allowing me the opportunity to speak. I hope you all enjoy the rest of the forum today!