

Growing **BUSINESS**

Opportunities

The County of Simcoe, home to world class operations, is quickly emerging as one of Ontario's largest business and manufacturing hubs. From automotive and food processing to glass manufacturing, aerospace and aggregates, the county is home to businesses in every niche. From its convenient location just north of the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), the county offers all the amenities of much larger cities, but without the traffic gridlock, noise, pollution and costs that come from living and working in major urban centres.



Written by Robert Hoshowsky

Set against the backdrop of some of the most beautiful scenery in all of Canada, Simcoe County is popular with anyone cherishing a balance of work and play. It offers a four-season outdoor playground with waterfronts including Georgian Bay, Lake Simcoe and world-famous Wasaga Beach. Presently, the county is home to about 465,000 people, with an anticipated 50 percent growth rate by 2031. Newcomers arrive daily and many are attracted by business opportunities, affordable housing, schools and overall quality of life.

The county has a scenic, central location with easy transportation corridors to Toronto and the United States. As the county is within an hour's drive of roughly nine million people and accesses a further 130 million within a day's drive, it is ideally positioned to attract business, new residents, and visitors alike. It also has the

Lake Simcoe Regional Airport with a runway long enough to land international commercial aircraft, as well as customs capabilities.

The county is fully committed to retaining and attracting new industries, and recently placed even greater emphasis on economic development. The county is taking a new three-pronged approach to how it views business in the region. Using its new guiding principles – Attract, Grow and Support, the county is taking more proactive measures to promote the region as a good place to do business. Target sectors for the county include advanced manufacturing, health and wellness, tourism, agriculture and agri-foods.

"We have invested around the idea of creating a welcoming and supportive environment that will help the County attract,

grow, and support new and existing businesses," said County Warden Gerry Marshall. "There are many emerging opportunities and now is the time for us to promote the County as a premier location to live, play, and do business."

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One of those new investment readiness tools is the county's online land inventory (edo.simcoe.ca/properties). The county recognized that site selectors and potential investors do the majority of new location searches online. This new system allows the county to present area (commercial and industrial) opportunities in one spot.

While attraction efforts are important, the county recognizes that supporting local business is always key when building a strong and diversified economy. An estimated 80 percent of job growth occurs when existing businesses expand. Recognizing this type of growth requires long-term, regional measures, the County of Simcoe's economic development office has focused on collaborating with local businesses, school boards, colleges and universities to help improve training and education opportunities that meet local labour market needs.

Georgian College, in Simcoe County, works closely with business leaders and industry experts to ensure that what they are delivering will meet the needs of the region and businesses in the region.

In addition to this business relationship, the County of Simcoe Council believes that post-secondary education and strong local schools are vital to the region's communities ►



"The county is fully committed to retaining and attracting new industries, and about five years ago, it started to focus on economic development in earnest."

► and economy. Because of that, County Council has financially supported post-secondary education including Georgian College and Lakehead University – an area that is a provincial responsibility, yet this upper tier municipal government feels strongly about its value and support.

"We are one of the largest co-op colleges, and because of that, our students are going out into the workforce on a regular basis in Barrie, the County of Simcoe, Orillia and well beyond," says Kevin Weaver, Dean of Technology and Visual Arts at Georgian College. Georgian College, as a cooperative educator, is a recognized leader in Canada for combining classroom-based and experience-based learning.

The college receives valuable feedback from students and employers to help enhance the curriculum. It also brings in industry experts who work in their fields throughout the region to take on part-time teaching.

"And that is another mechanism tying us to what's happening out there in industry, because they bring that industry to us at the college and to the classroom – to the course – and to the students. So those are significant ways in which we as a college are strongly connected."

Representatives from Georgian College and the county's economic development department regularly discuss issues with local employers and manufacturers. "We always keep a pulse on what we're doing," says Weaver. "We know that the more prepared our graduates are in our industries within the County of Simcoe, the more we can actually help be a driver of economic development."



The College has program advisory committees composed of external industry and business experts who meet twice a year to help the college with input on programs and discuss changes required, if any. "What we're trying to do through the committees is engage industry, business and community leaders to ensure programming is relevant to industry needs," states Weaver.

The college is continually updating its course selection. Prior to new courses being launched, the college gathers information internally and externally, researches labour market needs and seeks input from industries and businesses. Most recently,

as a result of this ongoing process, a new program is being introduced this fall on big data analytics which examines large amounts of data for hidden patterns and trends. "We asked: what skills would a graduate need to be successful and to be able to help companies who are looking to make more out of their data?" From this, a new graduate certificate program has been formed and is the only one in Ontario.

The college recently formed a partnership with Lakehead University. Between the two there will be more than twenty new degrees available in Simcoe County. One goal, says Weaver, is ►



▶ to build pathways for students who may start in a two-year program and then move into a three-year program and on to a degree if they choose. Georgian and Lakehead will also be offering integrated degrees that combine the best of university and the best of college into four years whereby students graduate with both Lakehead and Georgian credentials.

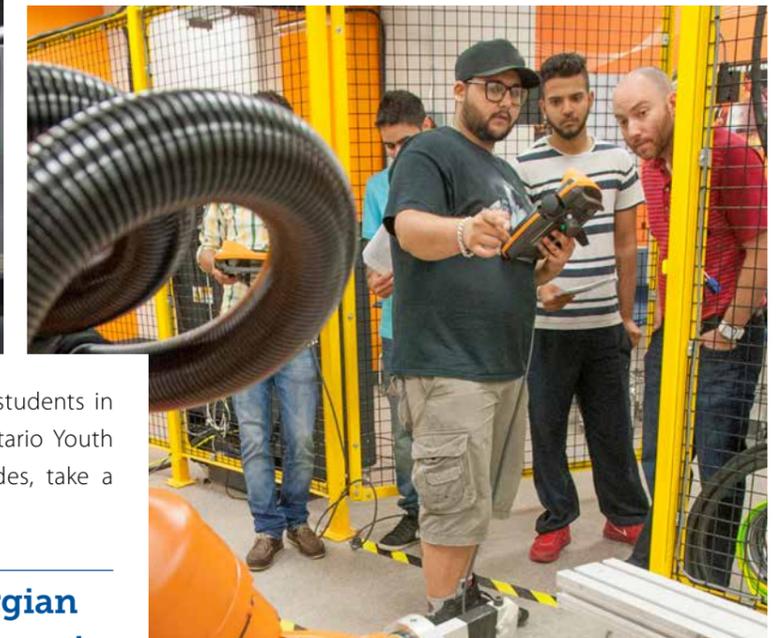
“Manufacturing is alive and well in Simcoe County.”

“The reality is the opportunity for graduates is very strong. This is true in degrees, diplomas, certificates, and that includes skilled trades too. The programming available to students interested in a variety of trades is there. They can have great working conditions, make a good salary, work for a company or, in many cases, start their own business. Education is the engine. We need to support the economic development of our regions through industry, education and training, in order to continue to attract, grow and support businesses in our region.”

This is where Simcoe County fits in. The County is focused on bringing industry and education together to ensure area businesses have the labour force not only to meet the needs of today but for the future as well. “We have some amazing local companies doing really cool work – from armoured vehicles and landing gear for airplanes to the famous glass staircase in New York’s Time Square and working with Disney on new shoe designs. One of our key focus areas is to work with these area businesses to help ensure they have access to the labour they need in order to thrive,” says Marshall.

One area champion supporting these efforts is Chris Edwards, President of Weber Manufacturing Technologies Inc. Weber is a fully integrated mold manufacturer and is active in numerous sectors including automotive interiors and exteriors, home and building products and aerospace. The company employs 183 staff including skilled labourers, engineers, designers, machinists, mould makers, millwrights, industrial electricians, chemical technologists, chemical technicians, model shop builders, welders and administration staff.

To meet the demand for trained workers, the company has fostered relationships with schools in the area. “I have a passion for education and continuous education as it relates to skilled labour,” says Edwards. “What I am trying to do, from a manufacturing point of view, is work closely with Georgian College and local high schools to develop the right programs to encourage high school students to enter those programs and learn a skilled trade.”



In particular, Edwards encourages high school students in Grades 11 and 12 to take advantage of the Ontario Youth Apprenticeship Program to look at skilled trades, take a co-op term and explore skills training.

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“This way, there are more employees to choose from, and other employers are doing the same – coming together as a group and promoting skilled trades and colleges and high schools,” he says. “There are a lot of jobs here in the Simcoe area. There are many great opportunities in skilled trades. You can own your own business. You can work in manufacturing. You don’t have to go to Toronto to get that dream job when you can stay here and get that balanced lifestyle to go with it.”

Weber Manufacturing relocated to the Midland area in 1967 for both business opportunities and lifestyle. Company founder

Reinhart Weber – a boating enthusiast – fell in love with the Georgian Bay area and decided to relocate his company. “It is one thing to have a business, and it is another to have a balanced lifestyle,” says company president Chris Edwards. “Even today, we believe in a balanced lifestyle.”

Building business in Simcoe County is well underway. Warden Marshall believes Simcoe County is a proactive region. “We’re here. How can we help, how can we engage?” he says. “We want to connect with our business community in a meaningful way, get closer to the manufacturing base and have a positive impact. We’re looking to understand where manufacturing and business want to go and how to get them to get where they want to be. We want to be a partner who tried to make these things happen. From our perspective, the County of Simcoe is a great place to work, live and play.” ■



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