The Essex Free Press

Opinions

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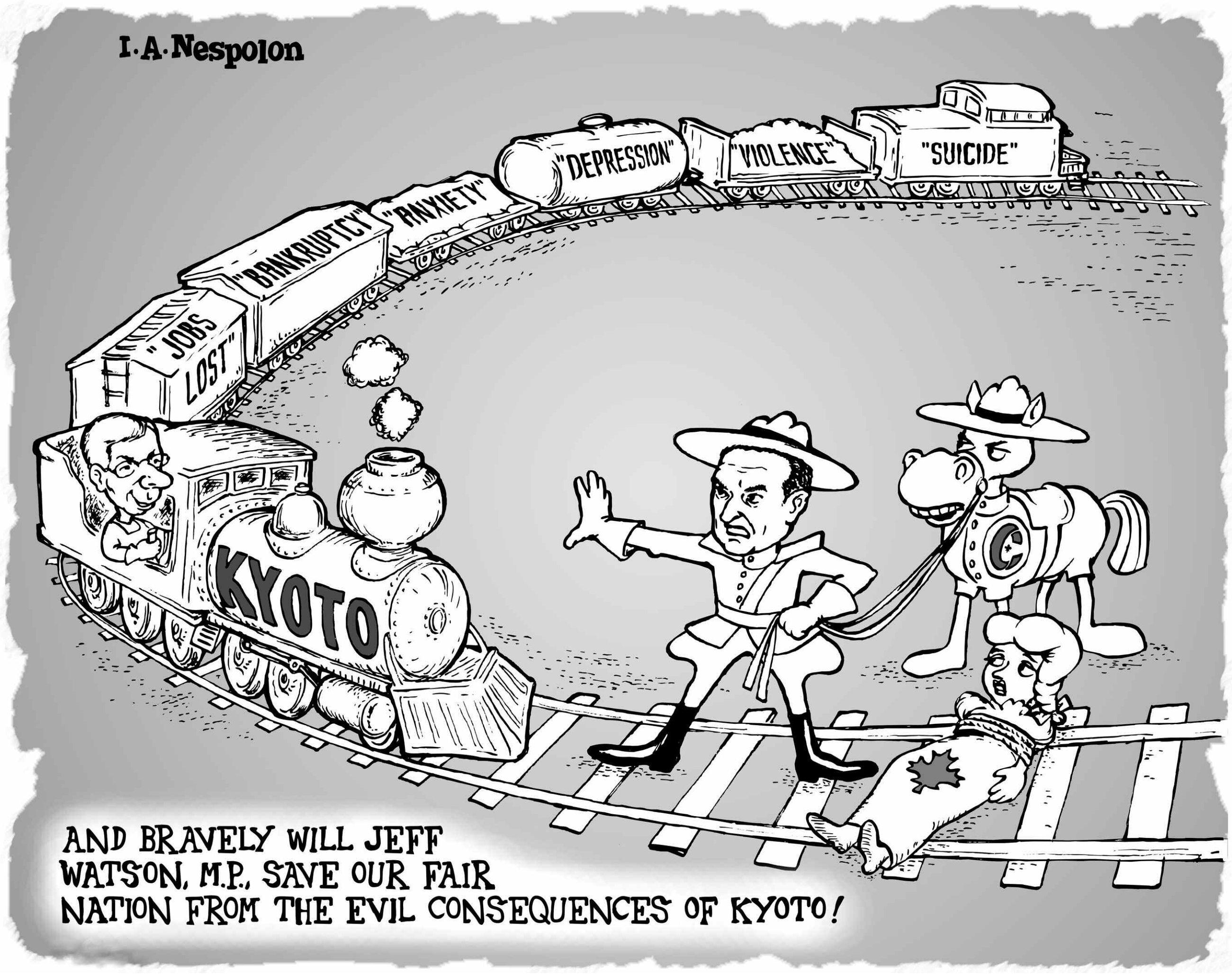

Moving at a snail's pace

free press **editorial** *laurie brett*

Members of the Downtown Study Ad Hoc Committee can't be faulted for being a bit puzzled these days. They devoted several months of their time in 2005 to collecting information on downtown vacancies and preparing a report for council. That report was delivered in October 2005 but it has taken well over a year for council to call a meeting to receive further input.

What's even more perplexing is how the committee's primary recommendation that the town hire an economic development officer could be given such short shrift at the Feb. 12 meeting, once a new business organization offered to deliver a strategic plan for the town that would cost taxpayers nothing.

Members of the new organization, tentatively called the Shores of Essex Resource Corporation, came to the meeting fully prepared to relieve the town of its responsibility for strategic planning. And the town appeared to be ready to offload that responsibility to this admittedly enthusiastic group based in the Harrow and Colchester South area.

It was all a bit surreal and disappointing.

How many empty storefronts will it take before Essex becomes serious about economic development? Even a delay of eight weeks – the period of time the Shores of Essex group says it will need to produce the report – is too long.

Plant closures and factory layoffs in Essex County have become national news. While other parts of the country flourish, we are sitting smack-dab in the middle of an economic slowdown. And, instead of getting serious about the situation, we're hunkering down to ride it out. That's what Essex has been doing for years – hunkering down. While communities like Lakeshore and LaSalle are reviewing their opportunities and trumpeting the fact they're open for business, Essex is silently hopeful that something good will come our way.

It's time to be proactive, not reactive. It's time to properly analyze the problems, not speculate about them. And it's time to dispel all of the misinformation that's out there by collecting accurate data. The fact of the matter is we don't know what our commercial vacancy rate is because no one's tracking it. We don't know how that rate actually measures up to other communities because no one's properly compared it. And we don't know how we're going to fill the empty storefronts because we have absolutely no plan.

The time for talk is certainly over. And waiting for someone else to deliver a solution is irresponsible. As budget discussions at the Town of Essex continue, one can only hope that council will have the foresight to earmark some funds for economic development. Another year without a visible commitment to economic development is simply unacceptable.

opinion *bill gay*

It was a week that rocked the North American auto industry as Daimler Chrysler announced layoffs of 13,000 workers in North America. They also not so subtly indicated they might sell the Chrysler Group, a prize acquisition described as "a marriage made in heaven" during the 1999 merger. The plot now thickens as another leak indicates the buyer of the Chrysler Group could be General Motors! Nissan-Renault almost joined up with GM last year but the deal fell apart.

In 1981, Chrysler Chairman Lee Iacocca, privately approached Ford's banker, Goldman Sachs, promoting a merger between those two auto giants. Both Ford and Chrysler were hurting at the time, and the idea of combining Ford's two divisions, Ford and Lincoln Mercury, with Chrysler's two divisions, Dodge and Plymouth made a lot of sense. Chrysler had just introduced the very popular K cars (Aries and Reliant) and the minivan was just around the corner. Ford had the top selling compact in the Escort.

But that's where the talks ended. Despite a private meeting between Iacocca and William Clay Ford, Ford's President Phillip Caldwell went public and blew the dream apart.

Would the proposed Chrysler–GM combination make sense? Not really. The two go head-to-head in virtually all segments of the North American market, except minivans where both GM and Ford are pulling out, leaving the field to Chrysler and the imports.

The new entity would cause disruptions in manufacturing that would make the present dislocations look minor. And what to do with two dealer networks? It cost General Motors a ton of money in the U.S. when they discontinued the Oldsmobile franchise a few years ago. That's also why Ford was content to merge Ford and Mercury in Canada, but not in the states. Here, they just discontinued selling Mercury models.

GM (and Chrysler's) legacy costs in health care and employee pensions can't be solved with any merger. They are in for hard bargaining with the Canadian and American unions.

So disregard sensational talk of mega-mergers in the auto business. The positive side of last week's events shows no loss of shifts in Canada, and the good news that Chrysler will build the new retro muscle car, the Dodge Challenger, in Brampton. And many Chrysler workers could be called back if enough workers take the lucrative buyout package. The industry has long been cyclical, and even though today's overseas competitors are tougher than before, don't count Detroit's Big 3 out.

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