



CITY OF SARNIA

10-Year Economic Development Master Plan (2025-2035)

Prepared for City of Sarnia

May 7, 2025

**urban
Metrics**



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Executive Summary

Executive Summary

The City of Sarnia's 10-Year Economic Development Master Plan (EDMP) outlines a strategic approach to foster economic growth and diversification from 2025 to 2035.

Developed through a collaborative process involving extensive stakeholder engagement and analysis, the EDMP aims to guide efforts to transform Sarnia into a dynamic hub of innovation while leveraging its industrial heritage and strategic location.

The EDMP aligns with the City Council's Strategic Plan and focuses on four key areas:

1. Executing Best-in-Class Business Support and Programming
2. Maximizing the Potential of City-owned Assets
3. Amplifying Sarnia's Competitive Advantage
4. Leading Impactful Collaborative Partnerships

The Plan acknowledges Sarnia's current economic state, which is in transition from its traditional petrochemical and refining industries towards emerging opportunities in bio-industries, sustainable chemistry, and advanced manufacturing. It identifies key strengths such as the city's skilled workforce, strategic location, and unique assets like the waterfront and business parks. However, it also recognizes challenges including modest population growth, limited transportation options, and the need to diversify the economy beyond the "Chemical Valley" image, alongside the continued importance of the petrochemical industry in the local economic landscape.

Master Plan Approach

How the EDMP was Prepared

The City of Sarnia's 10-Year Economic Development Master Plan (the Master Plan, the Plan, EDMP) was developed through a collaborative and iterative process that commenced in Q3 2024 and culminated in Q2 2025. The process brought together commercial, industrial and community development partners interested in securing a strong future for the City of Sarnia.

The EDMP was carried out in four distinct phases.

PHASE 1		Analyze (August – October 2024) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Background Review ✓ Comparative Analysis ✓ Land Needs Analysis
2		Stakeholder Engagement (October – December 2024) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ 1-on-1 Interviews ✓ Industry Focus Groups / Public Open House ✓ Public Online Survey
3		Validate & Refine (January – May 2025) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Strategic planning session with City Project team ✓ Present draft vision, focus areas, strategic goals, and strategic directions
4		Master Plan Report (May 2025) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Finalization of draft master plan ✓ Presentation of master plan to Council for approval

Phase 1 – Analyze

Background Review

A combination of various City strategic documents and partner organizations' strategic documents were reviewed and consulted as part of the development of the Master Plan. The review provided a baseline understanding of local and regional initiatives and priorities that have been completed, are currently underway, as well as those that have yet to start. The background documents were used to support further research in other components in Phase 1 and served as useful platform to help design specific questions to be posed to stakeholders in Phase 2 - Stakeholder Engagement.

The following background documents were reviewed by the project team to establish baseline conditions, including key initiatives, programs and partnerships that promote economic development in the city of Sarnia and across Lambton County.

City of Sarnia Documents	Partner Documents
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High Level Economic Development Strategy, 2020 • Growth Management Plan, 2020 • Sarnia Community Improvement Plan, 2020 • Business Parks Competitive Market Analysis Report, 2022 • Sarnia Chris Hadfield Airport Master Plan, 2022 • Sarnia Waterfront Master Plan, 2022 • Sarnia Official Plan, 2022 • City of Sarnia Council Strategic Plan, 2024 • Neighbourhood Revitalization Project Action Plan, 2024-2025 • Sarnia Zoning By-Law • Invest Sarnia Sector Reports 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sarnia-Lambton Economic Partnership Economic Development Strategy, 2024-2029 • Tourism Sarnia-Lambton Strategic Plan, 2023-2026 • Sarnia Lambton Workforce Development Board, 2024-2027 Action Plan • Sarnia Lambton Chamber of Commerce Strategic Plan, 2024-2027 Western Sarnia-Lambton Research Park – Park Plan for Prosperity, 2020

Comparative Analysis, December 2024

The Comparative Analysis background report (CA) which was carried out as part of the Sarnia EDMP process, provides a detailed review of how the city compares to selected “comparable” municipalities in Ontario. The CA identified **Belleville, Brantford, Sault Ste. Marie, Welland, and Windsor** as suitable candidates. Sarnia was evaluated against each jurisdiction in terms of baseline statistics, economic development capacity, and service delivery. The CA report is intended to benchmark - or *compare* - the economic well-being and the economic development practices (tactics, programs, assets, and resources) of Sarnia against its peers across the province.

Statistical Comparison	Economic Development Comparison
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Population & Growth Base Economic Indicators Prevalent Sectors & Industries Housing & Liveability Business Friendliness/ (Cost of Doing Business) Municipal Capacity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organizational Structure Economic Development budgets Staffing & Functions Role in Tourism Role in Investment Attraction City-owned Business Parks Review of Community Improvement Plans (CIPs)

Statistical Comparison Highlights

At a high level, the CA report found that Sarnia’s **population growth** between 2021 and 2023 was 5.5%, higher only than Sault Ste. Marie, and below the rates seen in Belleville, Brantford, Welland, and Windsor.

Economic indicators such as **unemployment** show Sarnia performing comparably to the best in the group, with a 2024 average unemployment rate of 6.1%.

Sarnia’s average and median **household incomes** are strong, second only to Brantford, both average and median figures have been used to partially account for the fact that relatively few very high-income households can skew average numbers and misrepresent the economic well-being of larger proportions of the community.

The **prevalence of low income** in Sarnia (11.2%) is more than double the provincial average but not the highest among the comparison cities.

Educational attainment is mixed: Sarnia excels in high school completion, for example, but lags-behind in post-secondary certification relative to some comparator communities.



Source: urbanMetrics., based on Statistics Canada Census Profiles 2021 and Statistics Canada Table 17-10-0155-01.

Sarnia's **labour market** is notably diversified, with significant employment in public services, commercial sectors, and a strong presence in oil & gas extraction, utilities, accommodation and food services, construction, and health care. This diversification is a strength, reducing vulnerability to sector-specific downturns.

Housing in Sarnia is predominantly single-family, more so than in any comparator, which offers affordability but less diversity. Home prices in Sarnia are lower than many southern Ontario cities and are competitive with the comparator group.

Sarnia's **business environment** is marked by low commercial and industrial **tax rates** (second lowest among comparators), competitive development charges, and

affordable building permit fees. Industrial water and wastewater costs are the lowest, though Sarnia does not accept industrial process water, which may limit some types of investment.

Land and property values for industrial and commercial uses based on completed transactions since 2019 (sourced from CoStar Realty Group data) are also the lowest among the comparison set, reflecting both opportunity and the need for increased economic activity to drive up value.

Business Case Comparator Table

	Sarnia	Belleville	Brantford	Sault Ste. Marie	Welland	Windsor
Tax Rates	2nd					
Industrial Tax Rate	3.9874390%	4.9600450%	3.7222190%	7.7055210%	5.2221390%	5.2332130%
Commercial Tax Rate	3.3493230%	4.1425440%	3.1543224%	4.0535630%	3.744326%	4.6659160%
Non-Residential Development Charges	3rd/ 4th					
Commercial	\$9.83/ sq. ft.	\$9.13/ sq. ft.	\$10.97/ sq. ft.	\$0	\$25.24/ sq. ft.	\$18.51/ sq. ft.
Industrial	\$9.83/ sq. ft.	\$9.13/ sq. ft.	\$10.97/ sq. ft.	\$0	\$12.22/ sq. ft.	\$0
Building Permit Fees	3rd/ 2nd					
Retail	\$18.50/ sq. m.	\$17.00 / sq. m.	\$11.84/sq. m.	\$19.25/ sq. m.	\$24.11/ sq. m.	\$29.06/ sq. m.
Industrial	\$10.75/ sq. m.	\$12.00 / sq. m.	\$8.93/ sq. m.	\$13.63/ sq. m.	\$20.67/ sq. m.	\$29.06/ sq. m.
Real Estate	1st					
Industrial and Commercial Land price/ acre	\$365,000/ acre	\$496,000/ acre	\$582,000/acre	\$771,000/ acre	\$830,000/acre	\$824,000/ acre
Vacant Industrial and Commercial Building Sales/ sq. ft.	\$121/ sq. ft.	\$127/ sq.ft.	\$200/ sq. ft.	\$165/ sq. ft.	\$181/ sq.ft.	\$159/ sq. ft.
Water Rate	1st					
Commercial 10,000m³	\$ 11,744.00	\$ 18,526.00	\$ 23,436.00	\$ 21,650.00	\$ 22,186.00	\$ 12,975.00
Industrial 30,000 m³	\$ 30,062.00	\$ 49,041.00	\$ 70,155.00	\$ 60,270.00	\$ 66,987.00	\$ 35,964.00
Industrial 100,000 m³	\$ 83,826.00	\$ 155,354.00	\$ 233,295.00	\$ 194,359.00	\$ 219,068.00	\$ 112,964.00
Industrial 500,000 m³	\$ 376,900.00	\$ 617,680.00	\$ 1,165,401.00	\$ 958,668.00	\$ 1,086,212.00	\$ 539,938.00
Wastewater Rate	1st					
Commercial 10,000m³	\$ 15,209	\$ 15,968	\$ 21,300	\$ 17,753	\$ 30,600	\$ 39,284
Industrial 30,000 m³	\$ 38,931	\$ 42,524	\$ 63,900	\$ 49,421	\$ 92,382	\$ 107,166
Industrial 100,000 m³	\$ 108,555	\$ 135,219	\$ 213,000	\$ 159,374	\$ 302,209	\$ 332,273
Industrial 500,000 m³	\$ 488,085	\$ 481,761	\$ 1,065,000	\$ 786,108	\$ 1,498,659	\$ 1,571,624
Electricity	3rd					
General Service Greater Than 50 kW Distribution Service Charge (monthly)	\$170.85	\$141.36	\$265.70	\$742.06	\$ 336.30	\$0.00

Source: urbanMetrics., based on BMA Municipal Bench Marking Studies 2023-2024, CoStar Realty Group and individual utility distribution companies.

Economic Development Comparison Highlights

Sarnia, like most comparators, delivers economic development services internally within the municipal corporation but is also served by a regional economic development corporation (the Sarnia-Lambton Economic Partnership).

Sarnia's economic development **budget** is smaller than those of Sault Ste. Marie, Welland, and Windsor, both per capita and per business. Economic Development **staffing** in Sarnia is also smaller, with only two (2) dedicated economic development staff, compared to five (5) in Belleville and six (6) in Sault Ste. Marie. This results in Sarnia's staff taking on more "generalist" roles, while larger departments in other cities have more structured teams of "specialists" for investment, business retention, tourism, small business support functions, or other.

Despite limited resources, Sarnia strives to deliver a full suite of economic development functions, including city-owned asset development and management which is highly unique among the comparators and limits capacity for other programs/initiatives in the Department in its current state.

Economic Development Budget Comparison

	Census Population (2021)	Businesses with Employees	EcDev Budget 2024	EcDev Budget per Capita	EcDev Budget per Business	EcDev Staff
Belleville	55,070	1,916	n/a	-	-	5
Welland	55,750	1,271	\$670,000	\$12.02	\$527	2
Sarnia	72,045	2,051	\$560,000	\$7.78	\$273	2
Sault Ste. Marie	72,050	1,928	\$778,000	\$10.80	\$403	6
Brantford	104,690	2,985	\$720,000	\$6.88	\$241	4
Windsor	229,660	6,411	\$2,194,000 ¹	\$9.55	\$342	5
¹ Budget includes Climate Action staff and activities which is located within the Economic Development Office.						

Source: urbanMetrics., based on OMAFRA Community Profiles and annual budgets for the individual municipalities.

Sarnia Land Needs Analysis, December 2024

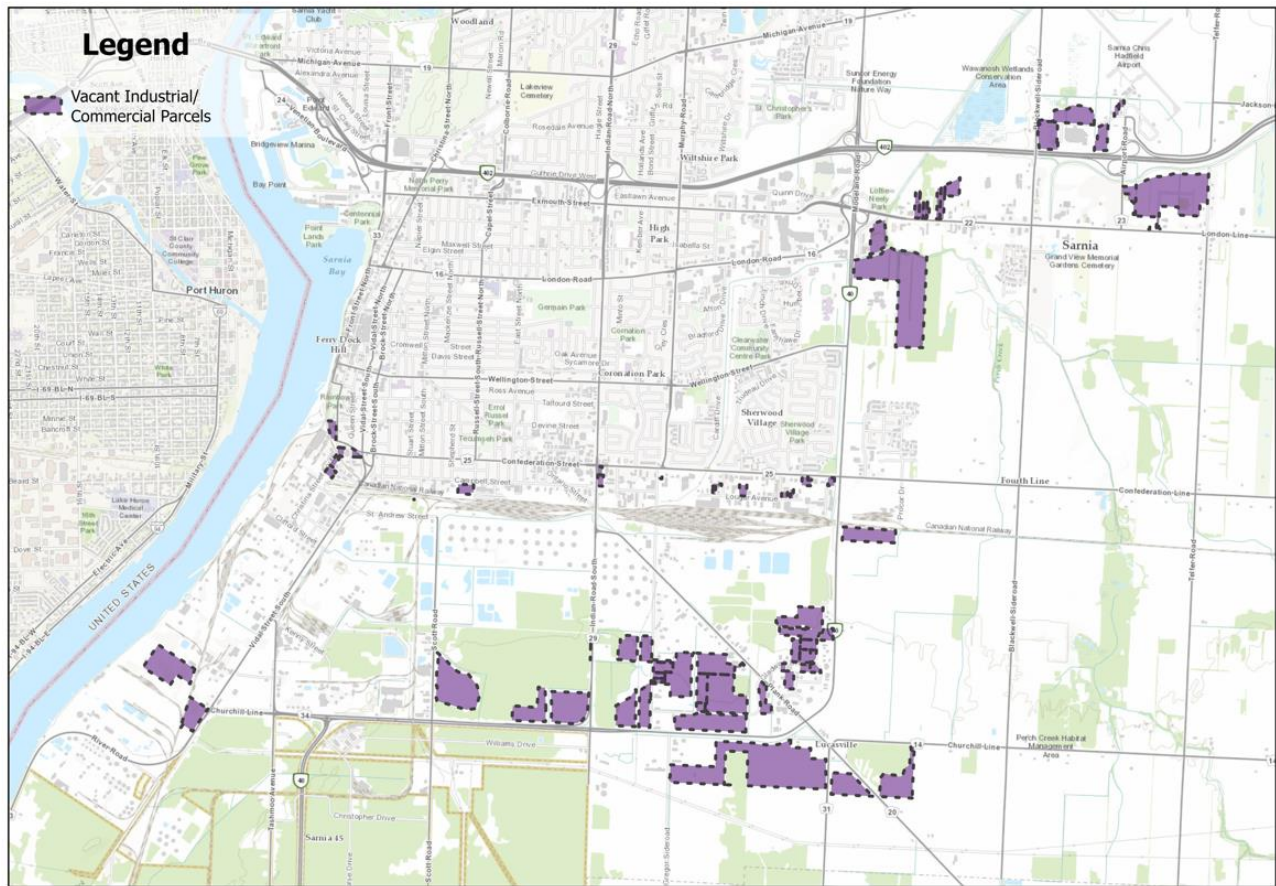
A Land Needs Analysis Report (LN) was completed and evaluates the quantity and characteristics of vacant employment land suitable for industrial and select commercial and institutional employment uses in Sarnia. It builds on previous land needs and asset-based analyses conducted over the last five years and serves as a background study for the creation of the EDMP.

The LN report addresses key questions about the availability and suitability of land for industrial development, land asset alignment with growing industries, and the relevance of previous economic development recommendations related to industrial land management and municipal oversight.

The high-level findings indicate that Sarnia has a sufficient supply of industrial land to support projected employment growth up to 2051, with approximately 337 gross hectares of vacant or severely underutilized employment land identified. **While the quantity of land is not a limiting factor, the LN report highlights the need for more tactical efforts (i.e. funding commitments) to address infrastructure and servicing shortfalls to deliver shovel-ready land -- including within city-owned business parks -- to realize new investments.**

The LN report highlights that Sarnia's land supply can reasonably fulfill its potential as a high-functioning destination for business investment and growth, particularly in sectors such as advanced manufacturing, clean energy, and professional services which are based on provincial trends and recent investment announcements across southwestern Ontario.

Current Supply of Vacant Commercial & Industrial Land



SOURCE: urbanMetrics inc., with data from the City of Sarnia and imagery from County of Lambton & ESRI Canada.

Phase 2 - Stakeholder Engagement

A variety of engagement methods were used to solicit feedback from a diverse group of stakeholders.

Through the EDMP outreach process, a total of over **800 unique voices** were drawn into the discussion about what specific actions the City of Sarnia should be undertaking to promote, empower, and grow the local economy. This Master Plan has been built open, honest, and deliberate discussions with business, labour, education, community, and political leaders committed to a strong and prosperous future.

Our process included:

- **One-on-One Interviews** with the Mayor, Members of Council, Economic Development Partners, Business and Industry Partners, and neighbouring First Nations (x 21 participants)
- **Focus Groups** (5 sessions, x 76 participants)
 - Retail, Arts & Tourism
 - Community Wellness
 - Industry & Agriculture
 - Development & Transportation
 - Public Open House
- **Online Survey, Public** (x 713 responses)

A detailed **‘What Was Heard’** document was created summarizing the findings from the stakeholder engagement. Select results are highlighted throughout the Master Plan to provide context on the direction and recommended areas of focus and actions.

‘What Was Heard’ Document in **Appendix A**.

Phase 3 – Validate & Refine

Strategic planning session with City Project Team

Building upon the results from the Analyze and Stakeholder Engagement phases, Sarnia Economic Development Department (SEDD) staff and the City's Senior Management Team (SMT) were consulted following the completion of stakeholder engagement to determine realistic and achievable priorities that could be taken forward as part of the EDMP. As part of this process, the consulting team presented a total of ten themes (not in ranked order) that community stakeholder/ participants indicated they wanted to see "improved" and/ or "prioritized" as part of the Master Plan (see below).

10 "Emerging Themes" for Improving Sarnia's Economic Outlook (Priorities)

- | | |
|--|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. New business attraction, facilitating job creation and growth of existing business. 2. Improve transportation connectivity 3. Create a more business friendly environment at City Hall 4. Downtown waterfront development 5. Investment ready lands/ investment readiness | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. Asset development (Airport and Harbour) 7. Investing in quality-of-life improvements 8. Downtown revitalization 9. Tourism development 10. Changing Sarnia's perceived image as a "heavy industry" city |
|--|--|

The input from SEDD staff and the City's SMT provided a clear direction to developing an EDMP that was realistic within the context and parameters of the City's capabilities. To narrow down the list of ten emerging themes, the consultant team grouped similar priorities into **four (4) areas of focus** that the EDMP and SEDD would be best aligned to deliver over the ten-year period. Below are the following four focus areas that will be presented later in the EDMP:

1. Executing Best-in-Class Business Support and Programming
2. Maximizing the Potential of City-owned Assets
3. Amplifying Sarnia's Competitive Advantage
4. Leading Impactful Collaborative Partnerships

Present draft, vision, focus areas, strategic goals, and strategic directions to stakeholders

Prior to finalizing the EDMP, an in-person stakeholder debrief session was held in **early May 2025** where 23 stakeholders from across the economic development ecosystem attended. All stakeholders who participated in the one-on-one interviews and industry focus groups were invited to the session.

The purpose of the debrief session was to present the stakeholders with a preview of the EDMP and ensure stakeholders buy into the vision, focus areas, strategic goals, and strategic directions of the EDMP and ensure their insights and priorities were properly reflected. Feedback from the session was incorporated into the final version of the EDMP.

Phase 4 – Master Plan Report

Finalization of draft master plan

The finalization of EDMP occurred during Q2 2025 and embodies the work conducted through phases 1 to 3 of including the input from stakeholders to deliver a plan that reflects the priorities and directions of the community.

Presentation of master plan to Council for approval

The EDMP was presented to Council on **May 26, 2025**, for approval.

Sarnia's Economy

Where We Are Today?

This section provides an overview of the City's economic development efforts since the department's inception in January 2021. It evaluates where Sarnia's economy is today, and how provincial, federal, and international initiatives and trends impact the on-going efforts to bring about economic growth and stability in the city.

SEDD Accomplishments To-date

The Sarnia Economic Development Department (SEDD) is a small, but highly active and deeply engaged municipal team nested within the City of Sarnia's CAO Office.

The two-person SEDD team is responsible for supporting local business growth, pursuing commercial and industrial investment opportunities, and advancing community partnerships and funding opportunities that enable a high-performing economy where Sarnia's citizens and businesses can flourish.

SEDD services include:

- Business consultations
- Start up support
- Site selection and community tours
- Sale of municipally owned land
- Market analysis and data
- Grant and financing assistance
- Business Retention and Expansion (BRE) programming
- Business growth support
- Supplier network information
- Referrals and connections with community partners
- Tailored support to meet other business needs
- Asset development

Since January 2021, SEDD has made substantial strides in just a few years, helping foster a sustainable economic environment and laying the groundwork for a prosperous future.

SEDD has achieved numerous milestones across a variety of sectors, contributing to plans for the city's long-term growth and success. Below is a brief overview of the department's accomplishments:

- ✓ **Sarnia Economic Development Strategy (2020):** The department advanced the implementation of the High-Level Economic Development Strategy recommendations that outlined key priorities for the city's growth, focusing on

advancement of the City-owned assets including the Sarnia Harbour, Sarnia Airport, Downtown Waterfront, two light industrial Business Parks, and the Marina.

- ✓ **Business Retention and Expansion Services:** The department provided ongoing support to existing businesses, offering consulting services, grant and funding navigation, and resources to help companies grow and thrive.
- ✓ **Business Incentive Programs:** Several incentive programs were promoted to encourage business expansion, including the Community Improvement Program (CIP) for Downtown and Mitton Village, and the My Main Street Program in partnership with FedDev Ontario which saw \$100,000 in grant funds go to new and existing businesses in Sarnia to expand and drive new customers.
- ✓ **Market Research and Data Services:** The department has offered local businesses access to market data and research, helping them make better-informed decisions regarding investment and expansion.
- ✓ **Strategic Partnerships Established:** The department has built strong partnerships with neighbouring municipalities and regional organizations, working together to enhance the economic prospects of the greater Sarnia-Lambton area. These collaborations have included joint marketing campaigns, sector-specific research, business support training and events, and more.
- ✓ **Provincial and Federal Grants:** In partnership with the City's leadership, the department successfully secured significant funding for infrastructure development, innovative projects, and sector growth initiatives.
- ✓ **Branding and Promotional Campaigns:** To boost the city's visibility and appeal to investors and businesses, SEDD launched the "Invest Sarnia" and "Explore Sarnia" brands. Targeted marketing campaigns highlight Sarnia's strengths in clean tech, manufacturing, and advanced technologies and quality of life.
- ✓ **Websites and Digital Platforms:** The City's economic development websites for "Invest Sarnia" and "Explore Sarnia" were launched and the Sarnia Harbour and Sarnia Airport websites were revamped. These sites along with supporting social media channels now feature resources for entrepreneurs, investors, and businesses. They serve as an essential hub for accessing grant information, data, and services offered by the department.

- ✓ **Asset Development:** Through strategic investments, partnerships, and targeted business development activities, the department has significantly contributed to enhancing the city's infrastructure and positioning key assets for economic growth. The department has taken integral steps to advance development and infrastructure planning for the City's Downtown Waterfront, two light industrial Business Parks, the Airport, and others. These efforts have also been supported by the department's work in obtaining the Investment Ready Certified Site designation for the 402 Business Park, bolstering the city's attractiveness to potential investors.
- ✓ **Regional Connectivity Improvements:** As part of long-term infrastructure planning, the department has advocated for improvements to regional and international transportation networks, particularly related to rail, marine, airport, and highway infrastructure, to strengthen Sarnia's position as a major industrial hub.
- ✓ **Neighbourhood Revitalization:** Two key programs spearheaded by the department in this area are the My Main Street Program and the Neighbourhood Revitalization Program. Both initiatives aimed at enhancing the quality of life for residents, attracting new investment, building resilient businesses, and stimulating economic activity. Priority areas have included Downtown Sarnia and Mitton Village but may expand to include other neighbourhoods in the city in the future.

Department Capacity Limits

The 10 Year Economic Development Master Plan (EDMP) builds upon the Department's recent efforts, as many of the programs and initiatives are intended to remain **core** elements of the Department's mandate and service offering.

Fundamentally, SEDD's current staffing level of two full-time staff has no further capacity to take on any new major initiatives, programs or responsibilities that have been identified as part of the development of the EDMP. The need for additional resources will be required in order to help carry forward the expectations that internal stakeholders (City Staff and Council) and external stakeholders (residents and community leaders) have identified that will foster a higher-performing local economy and advance key city-building initiatives, such as: waterfront development, harbour expansion, airport growth, tourism development, industry partnerships/outreach, and acceleration of private investment within Sarnia business parks, etc. If the City wishes to fully capitalize on all these expectations, more staff and funding would be required to effectuate change.

It should be recognized that many of the day-to-day functions that SEDD are engaged in, such as airport operations and harbour resource management, for example transcend typical responsibilities for a municipal economic development team. Consideration should be given to the City staff's future role in each of these assets and be informed through asset-specific strategies that are proposed to advance or are currently under development.

Where is Sarnia's economy today?

Sarnia's economy is currently in a state of transition, balancing its traditional industrial strengths with emerging opportunities.

The city's economic base remains anchored in petrochemical, refinery and related industries, with a significant concentration in chemical and feedstock manufacturing. There is, however, a growing emphasis on diversification, particularly towards bio-industries, sustainable chemistry, and advanced manufacturing. Sarnia's workforce has technical capacity for developing complex industrial facilities which integrate worldclass design and industry leading best practices, including sustainability and green practices.

Sarnia has a proud tradition of building complex industrial systems that scale with market conditions. Industry leaders have stressed that Sarnia is recognized globally within the energy sphere for its capacity to implement new, ground-breaking industrial processes.

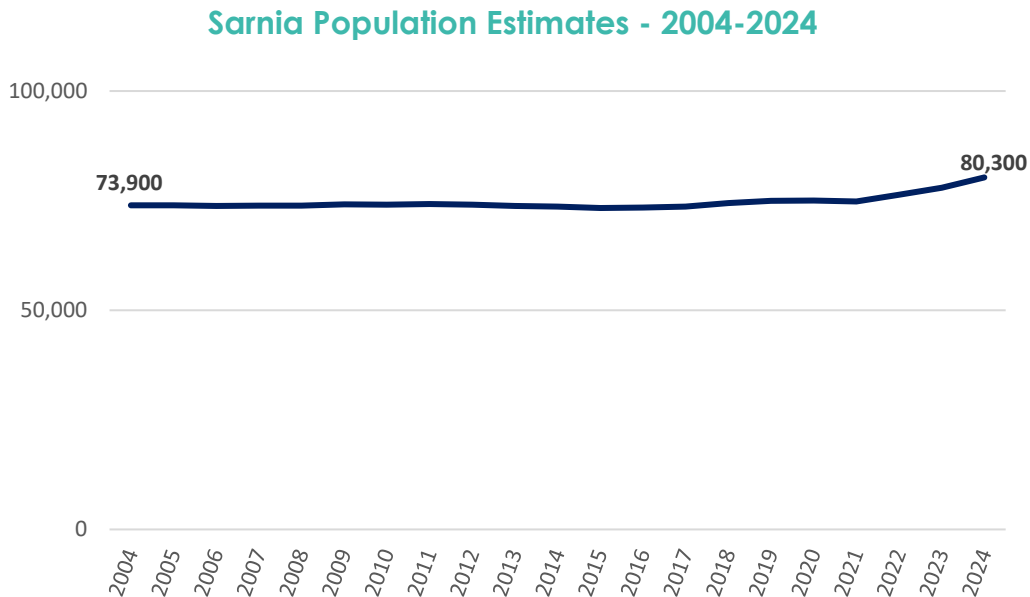
Population Growth

Over the past two decades, Sarnia experienced relatively little growth, hovering close to 75,000 persons. Based on current, post-2021 Census population estimates produced by Statistics Canada, Sarnia's population has recently experienced a small surge pushing it just past 80,000 persons.

For some, this may sound counter to recent reporting in the media which typically references Sarnia's 2021 census population of 72,400. Statistics Canada's population estimates use census data as a starting point, then adjust for population changes and census coverage errors to provide more current and accurate figures between censuses annually.

At 80,000 in population, Sarnia is similar in size to Belleville. Much of the recent growth can be attributed to in-bound non-permanent Canadian residents (someone living in Canada temporarily on a work or study permit or as a refugee claimant), and a

broader workforce trend which has made smaller centres, like Sarnia, a more attractive lifestyle option for a growing number of remote workers. Through the pandemic people returned to Sarnia, simply because it provides a quality-of-life that is both familiar and welcoming.



SOURCE: Statistics Canada 17-10-0155-01. As of July 1st. For Sarnia CSD

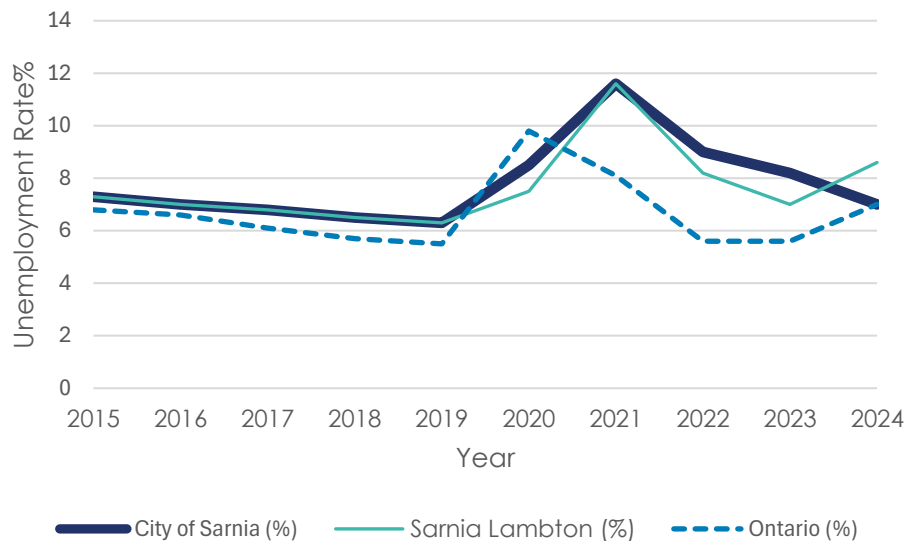
We would note that the recent population bump over the past few years may be short-lived due to shifting federal immigration policies, but efforts to sustain growth, including programs aimed at young, college-aged students is warranted.

Sarnia does face demographic challenges, with an aging population (median age of 46) and a smaller proportion of younger residents (19-34) compared to other comparable and mid-sized urban centres elsewhere in Ontario.

Labour Market & Business Composition

Sarnia's labour market is relatively strong. The city's unemployment rate is currently tracking at 7% which is slight better than the Sarnia-Lambton economic region, and on par with the province. While the unemployment rate is a key economic indicator, deviations above and below the provincial levels should be expected.

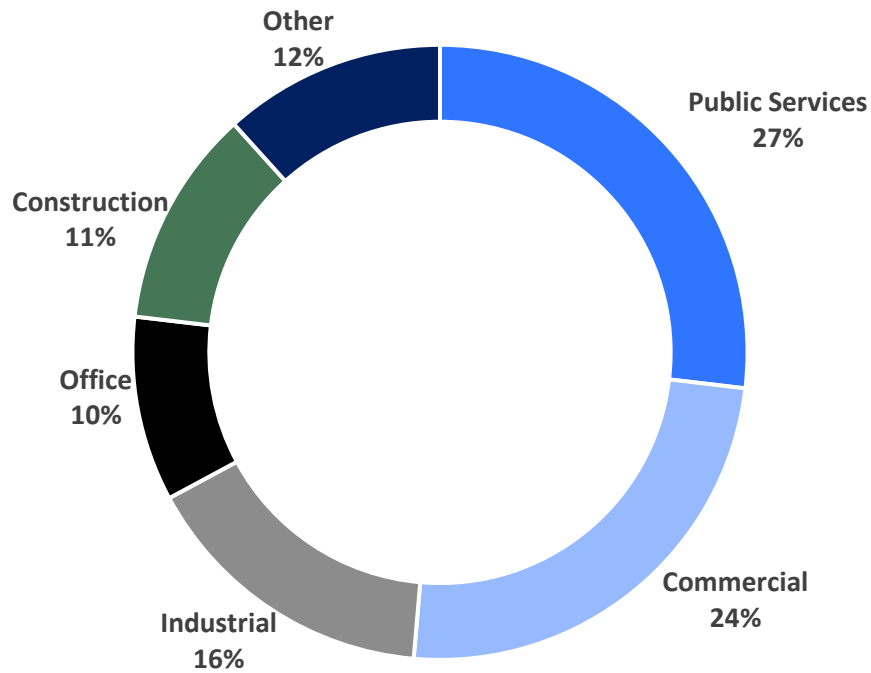
Unemployment Rate (%) for Sarnia (City of) and Ontario Average - Q4 2024



SOURCE: Statistics Canada Table 14-10-0457-01

Sarnia has a relatively diverse economy, with employment spread across occupations and sectors. It retains a strong economic base in industrial sectors that are modernizing and positioning themselves for a sustainable future.

Sarnia Employment by Grouped NAICS Sector

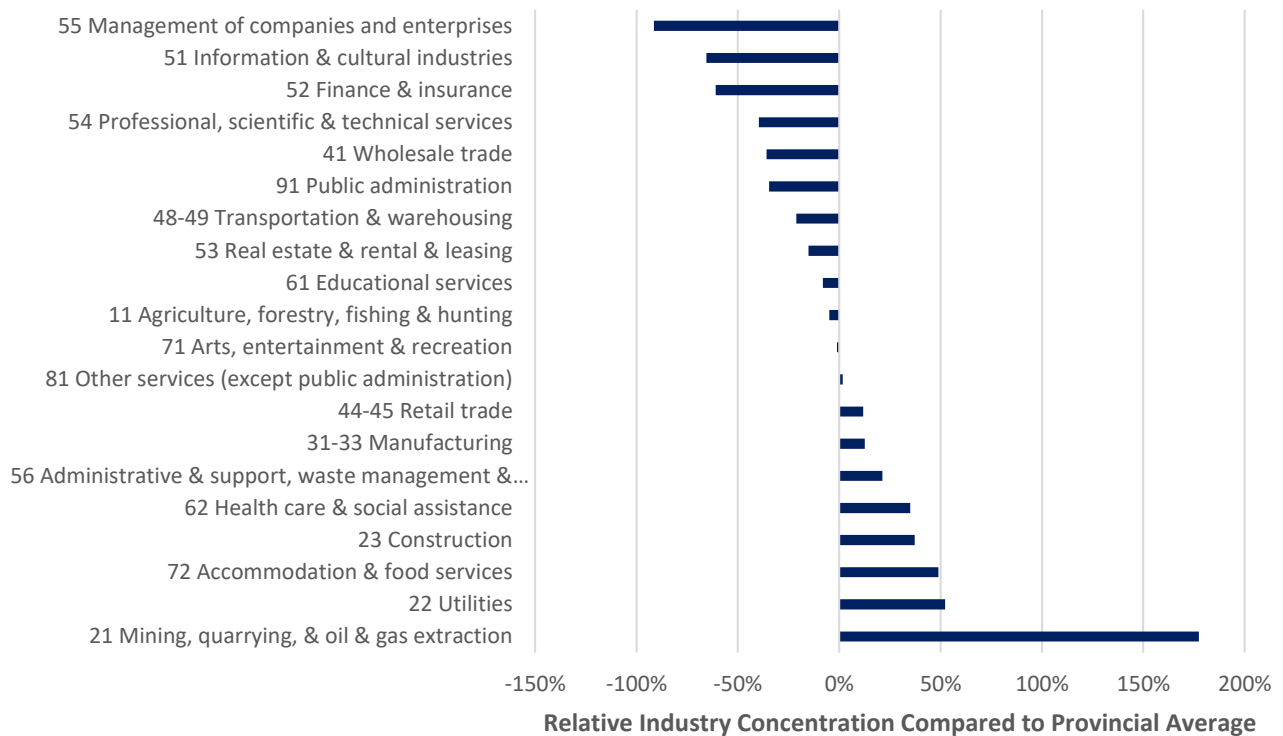


SOURCE: Statistics Canada 2021 Census Profiles

Sarnia boasts strong concentrations in certain industries compared to the provincial economy. Sarnia has strong concentrations of companies and economic activity in Mining, Quarrying & Oil & Gas Extraction, Utilities, Accommodation and Food Services, and Construction.

Conversely, other sectors are underrepresented compared to the provincial economy, with the Management of Companies and Enterprises, Information & Cultural Industries, and Finance & Insurance sectors much less active in Sarnia's economy than the provincial average. In addition, Public Administration (government) is among the under-represented sectors.

Sarnia Location Quotient Index by NAICS Industry



SOURCE: Statistics Canada 2021 Census Profile

City of Sarnia's Economic Assets

Sarnia owns several key economic assets that uniquely position it for future growth. These assets include Sarnia Harbour and the Oversized Load Corridor, the Chris Hadfield Airport, the downtown waterfront area, and two City-owned business parks - the Sarnia Business and Research Park and 402 Business Park.

Sarnia also benefits from its strategic location near the US border, access to major transportation corridors, and proximity to the Great Lakes shipping routes. Additionally, Sarnia's industrial expertise, coupled with regional initiatives in clean tech and sustainability, are positioning the city to play a role in the transition towards a greener and sustainable economy.

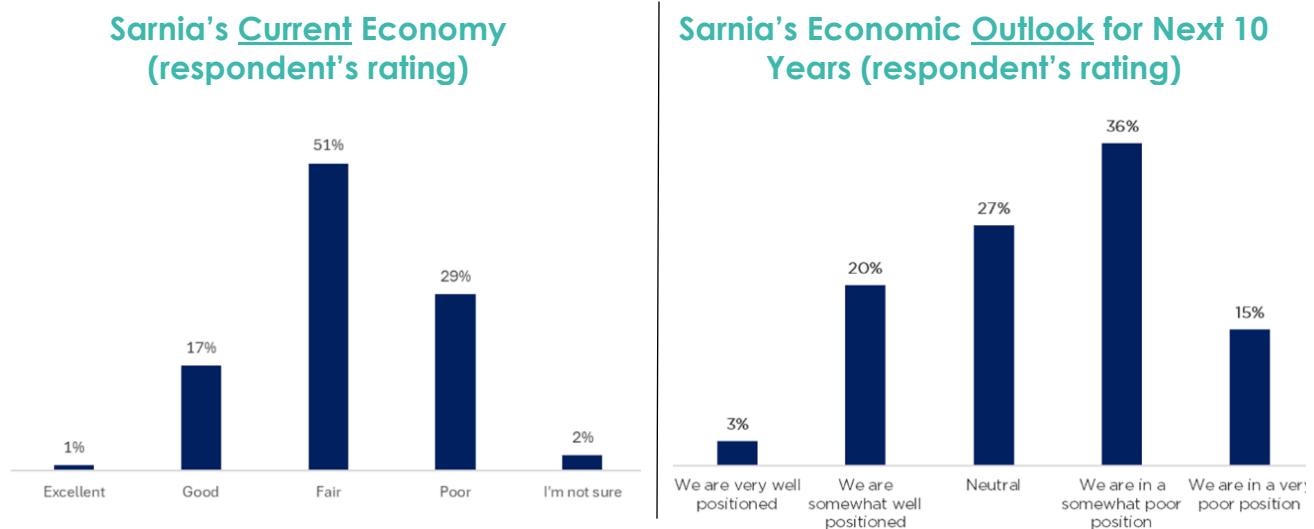
How Stakeholders Ranked the Current Condition and the 10-Year Outlook of Sarnia's Economy

As part of the EDMP process, economic stakeholders and members of the public were asked to weigh in on prevailing and future economic conditions.

A total of **713 survey responses** were tabulated by the project team. The survey was undertaken around the time of the US-elections (Fall 2024), and just before the onset of escalating diplomatic tensions between the US and Canada, including tariff, border and sovereignty disputes.

Most respondents indicated that they see Sarnia's current economic performance as "fair" (51 per cent), with 29 per cent viewing it as "poor", and 17 per cent as "good", and the remaining 3 per cent as excellent (1 per cent) or unsure (2 per cent).

While respondents were generally more pessimistic about the future of the local economy, 36 per cent felt that the city was in a somewhat poor position over the next ten years, and 15 per cent went further and felt the outlook was very poor. 27 per cent of respondents identified with a neutral economic outlook, 20 per cent felt that the city is somewhat well positioned for the future, and 3 per cent felt that Sarnia is very well positioned for the next 10 years.



Source: Economic Development Master Plan Online Public Survey Q7 & Q8, October-December 2024

SWOT Analysis

The Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) analysis below consolidates the background research, analysis and the stakeholder input that was gathered as part of the development of the EDMP. The insights helped identify *areas of focus* and *strategic directions* that the SEDD should pursue and support over the ten-year period of the plan.

Strengths

- Large heavy industrial operations provide significant economic momentum for the City and its economic base
- A skilled-labour workforce that is well positioned and ready to undertake large, sophisticated industrial projects
- Unique City-owned assets (Waterfront, Business Parks, Airport, Harbour, etc.) that can support economic growth and promote competitive advantage
- Sarnia's proximity to the United States (market access) and situation along Highway 402
- Lambton College and the Western Sarnia-Lambton Research Park's research and innovation capabilities
- Natural assets (lakefront, beaches, river, etc.)
- Cost of living versus other locations in Southwestern Ontario

Weaknesses

- The City has a reputation for not being open for business and red tape
- Modest population growth versus the rest of Southwestern Ontario
- Limited transportation options connecting Sarnia to neighbouring centres including London, Windsor, Waterloo Region and the Greater Toronto Area
- Lack of available industrial real estate (built space) and shovel-ready industrial sites
- State of municipal infrastructure
- Lack of family-friendly amenities to attract and retain families

Opportunities

- Waterfront development to attract tourism and support community development
- Developing an open for business reputation at City Hall
- Initiatives to attract and retain young professionals and families as well as newcomers and immigrants to the city
- Develop better transportation connectivity both in and out of Sarnia as well as within the city
- Further collaboration and coordination among Sarnia and Lambton County's economic development ecosystem partners including First Nations communities

Threats

- Minimal known upcoming major industrial projects to keep Sarnia's large skilled trades workforce actively busy
- Uncertainty with the Line 5 pipeline project which supplies many industrial users in Sarnia
- Canada-US Relations: trade, border, etc.
- Instability with swiftly changing provincial and federal policy impacting Sarnia's heavy industrial base
- Aging workforce
- The perception of Chemical Valley being Sarnia's defining image outside of the community

Tariffs

The development of the EDMP has coincided with an unprecedented period of Canadian-US diplomatic tension. Historic trade relationship has been upended by a trade war initiated by the US administration. The US imposing tariffs on Canadian goods has become a major threat to Sarnia and Canada's economy which is highly dependent on US exports. It has reversed a once trusted and valued bi-lateral economic relationship and has caused grave uncertainty and threatens investment and job retention in many businesses across various sectors.

The Canadian response to US tariffs has created renewed interest in the need for trade diversification as well as large scale national east-west energy projects designed to mitigate the impacts of US tariffs and dependence.

At this juncture, Sarnia can capitalize on these trends and leverage its strategic location, expertise and transportation assets to connect to national and global markets. Sarnia's recent strategic investment in the Oversize Load Corridor is a prime example of a proactive investment that enables local manufacturers and construction crews to send and receive critical equipment and large (oversized) items to enable major energy and infrastructure projects across Canada and beyond.

Provincial, National & International Considerations

Below highlights the economic development priorities for the provincial and federal governments and how they may apply to Sarnia as well as macro-trends impacting the global economy.

Ontario

Ontario's economic development priorities focus on fostering growth across multiple sectors, enhancing infrastructure, and creating opportunities for communities. These priorities aim to build a competitive economy while addressing challenges such as population growth, global uncertainty, and sustainability.

Job Creation and Growth

- Ontario is aiming to grow its manufacturing sector through initiatives like the *Advancing Ontario Made Manufacturing Plan*, targeting output over \$120 billion and expanding manufacturing jobs to one million workers by 2035.
- Ontario is prioritizing investments and attraction efforts in automotive, aerospace, advanced materials and chemicals, clean technology and semiconductors and electronics manufacturing subsectors. Other priority sectors include life sciences and technology.
- The province is also focusing on critical mineral supply chains and sustainable resource management to support historic investments in electric vehicle (EV) manufacturing in Southwestern Ontario.

Infrastructure Development

- Ontario is implementing a \$191 billion infrastructure plan over 10 years to improve highways, transit systems, schools, hospitals and housing-enabling infrastructure.

Energy Security

- Investments are being made in securing reliable and affordable energy sources to support industrial growth and meet the demands of a growing population.
- Ontario is expanding nuclear energy capacity with small modular reactors (SMRs), refurbishing existing facilities and potentially selecting and investing new sites including a location within Lambton County.
- Hydroelectric projects and energy storage initiatives are being developed to meet rising electricity demand.

Growing the Agri-Food Sector

- The provincial government's "Grow Ontario" strategy aims to strengthen the agri-food supply chain to ensure stability and resilience and boosting food and beverage manufacturing Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by 10% and expanding agri-food exports by 8% annually.

How do these provincial priorities apply to Sarnia?

1. Attracting Advanced Manufacturing Investment

Sarnia's established petrochemical and chemical manufacturing industries and trained labour force align with Ontario's focus on attracting advanced manufacturing investment and developing new energy infrastructure for the province.

2. Critical Minerals Supply Chain

While critical minerals are being explored and mined in northern Ontario, Sarnia's industrial base and location along the Great Lakes could support down stream activities related to critical minerals processing or manufacturing components for electric vehicles.

3. Energy Investments

The Province's focus on developing energy security requires tremendous expansion to the grid. The province is actively looking for new sites to host energy production facilities including in Lambton

County. These types of projects are generational projects which Sarnia's industrial suppliers and talented skilled-labour force can contribute to and benefit from.

4. Agri-Food Sector

The Province's focus on expanding the agri-business sector and strengthening supply chains offers opportunity for Sarnia to further connect its surrounding farmland production with new food processing operations located within industrial lands. Sarnia's surrounding prime farmland produces an abundant supply of agricultural feedstocks (corn, soybeans, wheat, sugar beets, etc.) which ensures reliable access to high-quality raw materials for prospective food processing investments (particularly a growing plant-based protein and new ingredients market) that may seek Sarnia as a location to do business and creating strengthened supply chains.

Ontario's economic development priorities provide a framework that aligns well with Sarnia's industrial strengths and regional needs. By capitalizing on these initiatives, SEDD and its economic development partners can contribute to – and benefit from – the province's broader growth strategy as part of Sarnia's economic diversification and investment attraction efforts.

Canada

Canada's federal approach to economic development emphasizes fostering innovation, attracting investment, supporting First Nations and inclusive economic growth, and addressing critical national challenges – particularly housing and climate change. Below are key aspects of Canada's federal economic strategy.

Innovation and Productivity

- The federal government invests heavily in research infrastructure and talent development, allocating \$3.5 billion for modern facilities and \$2.4 billion for core research grants to boost innovation and productivity across many sectors industries.
- Boosting productivity and maintain the highest per capita foreign direct investments in innovation enabling assets, AI adoption, and clean technologies

Investment Attraction

- Emphasis on growing Canada's biofuels sector to support decarbonization efforts across heavy industries and modes of transport.
- Canada maintains one of the lowest marginal effective tax rates in the G7, making it a competitive destination for foreign direct investment (FDI)

Housing and Infrastructure

- Addressing the housing crisis is central to economic growth, with national targets to building nearly 4 million homes by 2031. This includes scaling modular housing and introducing cost allowances for rental projects.

Inclusive Growth and Sustainability

- Programs such as the Aboriginal Entrepreneurship Program provide up to \$5 billion in loan guarantees to support Indigenous communities' economic priorities.
- Canada is working towards net-zero emissions by 2050 through clean technology manufacturing tax credits, biofuel sector growth and energy transformation.

Regulatory Efficiency

- Efforts to align regulations across provinces aim to reduce barriers to internal trade, potentially increasing Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita by up to 4%.

How do these federal priorities apply to Sarnia?

1. Innovation and Productivity

The city has strong research and development capabilities hosting Lambton College, the Western Sarnia-Lambton Research Park, and many companies conducting research which can benefit from federal investments and support that will drive innovation and economic diversity.

2. Attracting Biofuel Investment

Sarnia and the surrounding area are already regarded as a leader in clean technology and biochemical industries which aligns with the federal government's priority in attracting biofuel investments.

Canada's economic development priorities provide a framework that aligns well with Sarnia's industrial strengths and regional needs. By capitalizing on these initiatives, SEDD and its economic development partners can contribute to – and benefit from – Canada's broader growth strategy that align with diversification and supporting the energy transition.

International Trends

Global Energy Transition: The shift towards clean energy and carbon-neutral solutions is a defining international trend. Investments in nuclear, hydrogen, renewables, and sustainable infrastructure are creating global economic opportunities.

Resilient Supply Chains: The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated a shift towards regionalized manufacturing and supply chains, presenting opportunities for smaller industrial hubs like Sarnia to capture value through logistics and specialized manufacturing.

Digital and Knowledge Economies: Global demand for digital services, tech innovation, and professional services is expected to rise sharply, fueled by Artificial Intelligence (AI), automation, and digitalization.

How do these international trends apply to Sarnia?

1. Global Energy Transition

Sarnia and the County have already actively positioned the region as a leader in the global shift toward clean energy and carbon-neutral solutions. Sarnia and the County's established industrial base, particularly in chemistry and energy, provides a strong foundation for transformative investments in hydrogen, renewables and sustainable infrastructure.

2. Resilient Supply Chains

Firms looking to reshore or regionalize operations require strategic locations that provide available real estate/ shovel-ready land to establish operations. Sarnia's strategic location, multimodal transportation network, and specialized manufacturing capabilities, position it to attract new reshoring investments that can easily access and service the rest of the North American market.

3. Digital and Knowledge Economies

As the development of new digital technologies continues, Sarnia's businesses must ensure they continue to adopt new technology and innovate to stay competitive. SEDD in collaboration with innovation partners have a role to play in encouraging local businesses to innovate and connect with new opportunities and programs that support technology adoption.

The SEDD plays a central role in harnessing these trends for local economic benefits. SEDD will need to continue to monitor these trends and developments and position the city to support attracting new investment, adoption of innovation and digital transformation in local companies, as well as building resilient supply chains.

Where Does Sarnia Want to be in Ten Years?

Sarnia's Economic Vision

The economic vision below has been crafted by the insights, input and aspirations of stakeholders. The vision is intended to be an aspirational statement that defines the desired long-term future state of an organization- essentially, what the organization ultimately wants to accomplish or become. ***In 2035 ...***

Sarnia is a dynamic hub of innovation, leveraging its proud industrial heritage and its strategic location to foster diverse, sustainable industries while enhancing quality of life, attracting new businesses and talent to drive economic prosperity.

By 2035, Sarnia will have paved a path for growth which includes:

1. Population growth

- Promote the benefits of living and thriving in Sarnia
- Diversify the demographic base, emphasizing young professionals, skilled trades and families
- Retain a high percentage of post-secondary graduates

2. A diversified and resilient economy

- Balancing the city's retention of traditional petrochemical industries while supporting energy transition and other economic activities
- Significant growth in new commercial and industrial plants and facilities

3. A reputation for proactive, business-friendly governance

- Be broadly recognized as an ambitious, top-tier location for business leaders seeking small and mid sized cities enterprise growth and investment
- Streamline development processes and reduce red tape
- Increase available investment-ready industrial and commercial properties

4. Dedicated and sustained funding for advancing City-owned Assets

- Fully built out 402 Business Park and Sarnia Business & Research Park
- Vibrant downtown waterfront as key economic and tourism asset
- Enhance the economic impact of Sarnia Harbour and Airport

5. An enhanced Quality of Life and Place

- Expanded family-friendly, cultural, and recreational amenities
- Improved transportation connectivity

Alignment with the City of Sarnia's Council Strategic Plan (2024)

The Economic Development Master Plan has been prepared and developed in full alignment with the Council-approved City of Sarnia Council Strategic Plan.

Vision

Innovative city, diversified economy, welcoming community

Mission

We foster a quality of life that connects our community to the future.

Strategic Priorities

- Asset Management
- Government Relations
- Community Well-being
- Economic Resilience

The EDMP will serve as a road map for how the SEDD will help support the implementation of the Economic Resilience strategic priority of the Council Strategic Plan for the City.

Economic Opportunities to be Prioritized

The following **economic opportunities** shall be the main areas of prioritization and focus that will guide the activities of the SEDD over the next ten years. These priorities reflect the insights of local business and community stakeholders and are universally recognized as areas which require corporation-wide leadership, direct involvement by City Staff and partnership with the economic development ecosystem.



[1] New Business Attraction/ Job Creation / Growing Existing Businesses

Limited new business attraction, job creation, and capital investment and expansions by existing companies is a threat to Sarnia's economic prospects. The comparative analysis indicated that Sarnia generates relatively less investment in non-residential development based on building permit revenue than in the comparison municipalities.

Stakeholders clearly indicated through the engagement phase that attracting new business, job creation and growing existing businesses should be at the forefront of Sarnia's Economic Development Master Plan and a key function of the Department, over the next 10 years.

The SEDD shall remain open to supporting the needs of all businesses, from all sectors, however limited resources will require that SEDD staff focus on business matters that lead to job creation and/or retention, including major employers and investments by new businesses that will create or retain a significant number of jobs, especially within and related to enterprise growth and investment within City-owned Business Parks.

Over the next 10 years, a leading indicator for the progress of the EDMP will be SEDD's level of activities that help generate significant growth in the number of business expansions and investments including new commercial and industrial development within the city.



[2] Business-Friendly Approach

Throughout the engagement phase, stakeholders repeatedly raised the issue that there was a distinct perception that the City is not open for business and that government red tape at City Hall is preventing business growth and new investments in Sarnia.

Whether just a perception or actual barriers exist, this issue affects businesses of all size and inhibits investment. The SEDD has a role to play in helping alleviate those frustrations and finding solutions in collaboration with other City departments in navigating City Hall for businesses to succeed.

The business community want and need a reliable and connected resource at City Hall to support their business aspirations.

SEDD is, first and foremost, a relationship builder that links local business and government for collaboration and effective change.

The SEDD is a resourcing-team that helps local businesses achieve their goals through timely information, sound policy advice, and relationship/network building. The SEDD will maintain an “open line of communication” between local business interests that are looking to grow and thrive in Sarnia and the local regulatory environment they need to navigate to achieve their goals.

Over the next 10 years, the Corporation must be more deliberate to foster a business-friendly, open-door approach designed to help local business leaders at all stages of their life cycle navigate and secure the best government services that will realize projects that deliver economic growth and diversification in the city.



[3] Reframing Sarnia's Image

Stakeholders expressed concern that Sarnia's image is too narrowly defined by those outside of Sarnia. Invariably, Sarnia's character is too closely defined by its "Chemical Valley" or "Heavy Industry" roots.

This reputational bias is seen as limiting Sarnia's potential as many of the benefits that residents and local businesses value most about Sarnia are unknown to those with only a passing understanding of Sarnia as a place. A more dynamic and all-encompassing picture of Sarnia needs to be communicated to a broader audience that will help drive new investment and attract new residents and visitors.

SEDD will continue to develop and utilize the "Invest Sarnia" and "Explore Sarnia" brands to boost the city's visibility and appeal to investors, businesses, visitors and potential residents. These brands will utilize marketing and social media channels and develop content to showcase all that's great about Sarnia including highlighting local businesses and city-assets that make Sarnia unique.

Over the next 10 years, improving Sarnia's image and perception will be critical to fostering economic growth, attracting visitors, and growing the population.



[4] Tourism Development

Tourism was specifically identified by stakeholders as a sector that could help diversify the local economy and be among one of the best industries to spur future growth in Sarnia.

The ability to develop Sarnia into a regional tourism destination in 10 years would be an ambitious undertaking given the absence of infrastructure, attractions and accommodations. Sarnia is currently well-positioned as a day-trip destination supported by a scenic waterfront park, an attractive downtown, local beaches golf courses and cultural events/festivals.

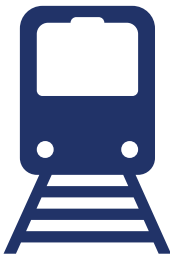
Developing Sarnia's profile as a small-town destination with tourism appeal would require effort, organizational support and crucially, municipal *funding*, including commitments to move forward with the waterfront master plan, among other things.

This would require the City to take a more active role in developing tourism assets while collaborating with regional partners like Tourism Sarnia Lambton (TSL) who promote Sarnia's tourism assets, experiences and opportunities as part of their mandate.

By enhancing tourism infrastructure - such as the downtown waterfront, local parks, recreation facilities, cultural and entertainment facilities, etc. – the city creates opportunities for private investments and local entrepreneurship, diversifying beyond its traditional base.

Over the next 10 years, developing Sarnia's tourism industry could play a role in shaping Sarnia's economic diversification efforts. However, this would require significant capital investment to pursue (i.e. placemaking, civic facilities, marketing, promotions and programming, and new staffing resources).

At present, the SEDD does not have capacity available to support a dedicated role in tourism, nor is there a tourism-specific budget to support such activities.



[5] Goods & People Movement

The loss of regularly scheduled commercial airline service to Sarnia in 2020 and minimal passenger rail service has created limited options for residents, businesses and tourists to travel in and out of Sarnia. The car has become the primary option when it comes to the connections between Sarnia and the rest of the province.

The lack of reliable and timely transportation options to destinations of preference is seen as a fundamental barrier to economic growth for Sarnia, and makes the community less attractive to students, working families, and employers.

Relative to other nearby centres such as London or Windsor, Sarnia has become increasingly disconnected from the rest of the province because of poor transportation connections by legacy passenger carriers.

Innovative solutions and transportation options must be explored including utilizing and integrating City-owned assets such as Sarnia Harbour and Sarnia Airport to improve goods and people movement. SEDD should continue to advocate for increased passenger services options of all types and engage with the transportation sector broadly, including new partnerships with enterprises that can close the gap.

Over the next 10 years, SEDD in collaboration with other community stakeholders will support advancement of multimodal mobility connections to help overcome the loss of legacy services including air, rail, bus and other mobility providers.

Leverage City-Owned Assets for Growth and Investment Opportunities

The EDMP prioritizes SEDD's involvement in key City-Owned Assets which drive economic growth and spending within Sarnia. These assets include:

1. Sarnia Downtown Waterfront
2. Sarnia Harbour
3. 402 Business Park
4. Sarnia Business & Research Park
5. Sarnia Chris Hadfield Airport
6. Andrew S. Brandt Marina

Significant time and effort have been allocated to City-owned assets over the past four years. This includes developing detailed Asset Master Plans for the two business parks, the airport, and the waterfront. Budget requirements for each have been incorporated into the municipal capital budget process, however these projects

remain predominately unfunded. This limits the ability for SEDD and the City to fully realize the potential of these assets. If continued to be left unfunded, SEDD's time and resources should be reallocated from asset development to other core economic development services that will have a positive impact on the local economy.

Stakeholders within the EDMP process indicated the top three most important assets that require prioritization, investment, and focus from the City over the next ten years include:



[1] Sarnia's Downtown Waterfront

Overwhelmingly, stakeholders indicated that Sarnia's downtown waterfront is the most important City-owned asset with the scale and capacity to drive future economic prosperity in Sarnia. The downtown waterfront is a dominant visual marker that binds the residents of Sarnia together. The waterfront – and its connection to downtown – is the defining feature that embodies a high quality of life for residents and provides a strong counter narrative to the industrial image many people outside the city have about Sarnia.

Efforts to build event programming and spearhead capital investments in key elements of the waterfront area are fundamental to the long-term well-being of the city. This requires interdepartmental cross-coordination within City Hall as well as committed funding for implementation of the currently unfunded Waterfront Master Plan. If funding for the plan is committed, SEDD is well-positioned to support business development activities along the downtown waterfront, including those which will generate buzz and stimulate private sector investment interest.

Over the next 10 years, the full implementation/realization of the City's 2022 Waterfront Master Plan should be a strategic priority that fulfills the public expectations for “big moves” on the City's waterfront. If the WMP is funded and recognized as a corporation-wide priority, the SEDD team can play a role as a catalyst for community and commercial activation and private/corporate investments which will be needed to achieve the type of experience that the downtown waterfront residents and visitors expect.



[2] Sarnia Harbour

Stakeholders recognize Sarnia Harbour is a key differentiator for the city as neighbouring communities do not have a comparable deep-water asset.

Commercial shipping tied to use of the Oversized Load Corridor and Great Lakes cruising were repeatedly identified as potential opportunities for the harbour to capitalize on. Sarnia's harbour not only provides access to the Great Lakes market but also to global markets via the St. Lawrence Seaway.

These connections expand Sarnia's reach and provide opportunities for trade diversification efforts for local businesses and attract possible new business investment and uses in the harbour. SEDD is best positioned to conduct marketing and business development activities on behalf of the harbour to generate new business.

However, Sarnia Harbour will require an estimated \$50 million over the next 10 years for capital infrastructure upgrades which is currently unfunded. Any growth in the harbour will be contingent of securing the capital investment to maintain the asset.

Over the next 10 years, the diversity and volume of commercial activity occurring in the Sarnia harbour can be a leading indicator for Sarnia's economic transition. This however will be entirely dependent on a decision to invest in harbour assets over the next 10 years.



[3] City-owned Business Parks

The City's 402 Business Park and the Sarnia Business & Research Park are important vacant industrial land sites that can be used to address Sarnia's limited available industrial real estate (built space) and shovel-ready sites in the city. The SEDD has a leading role in developing and marketing the City's Business Parks. The City-owned business parks are an

invaluable tool in supporting both city and regional investment attraction efforts and support the priority of new business attraction, job creation and growing existing businesses as identified in the section above.

SEDD's ability to attract development and new investment on these lands is dependent upon receiving significant capital investment for servicing the lands. Investors are seeking viable shovel-ready products for new investments. Without dedicated funding, investments will continue to land in communities where lands have been proactively serviced and are investment ready.

Over the next 10 years, the servicing, sale, and development in the 402 Business Park and the Sarnia Business & Research Park should be a leading priority to contribute to economic growth and new revenue generation for the City. This will remain dependent on significant capital investment that must still be approved. If not funded, the City should pursue a disposition strategy for the lands to accelerate development by private interests.

How Do We Get There?

The Sarnia Economic Development Master Plan (EDMP) is intended to align and situate the specific roles and responsibilities of the municipal economic development team to help achieve maximum economic impact in terms of growth, economic diversification, and fiscal health for the city of Sarnia, including on-going, cumulative non-residential (commercial/industrial) assessment growth.

For a relatively “new” municipal department, this Master Plan is the first iteration of a more *strategic* mandate that extends beyond simply marketing and growing business at the City-owned economic assets such as the Airport, Harbour, and Sarnia’s Business Parks and instead creating a full encompassing economic development department.

The priorities embedded in this EDMP are based directly on the insights and results of our engagement with community and business stakeholders, municipal leaders, City staff, and the public at-large.

Four **areas of focus** for Sarnia’s Economic Development Department are being recommended within the EDMP. These ‘**Focus Areas**’ are intended to establish a framework for SEDD’s workplan over the next few years (1-3) to set the city up for success over the next 10 years (to 2035).

SEDD FOCUS AREAS (x4)

1. Execute Best-in-Class Business Support & Programming
2. Maximized Potential of City-owned Assets
3. Amplify Sarnia’s Competitive Advantage
4. Lead and Support Impactful & Collaborative Partnerships

The four focus areas above have been ranked in order of priority and how current resources should be allocated to serve the needs of the community.

Each Focus Area has a corresponding strategic goal and a set of strategic directions that will guide SEDD staff and their strategic community partners over the course of the ten-year period.

Specific action items for each of the strategic directions have been identified as part of the short-term implementation plan (Year 1-3) for the Department’s use.

FOCUS AREA 1

Execute Best-in-Class Business Support & Programming

Since 2021, the SEDD has served as a main point of contact for business assistance, growing local businesses, supporting companies relocating to Sarnia and supporting early-stage ideas and business startups. **Simply put, the SEDD's core function is to help businesses grow and prosper in Sarnia.**

This must be the primary role and function of SEDD staff, with most time and effort dedicated expressly to serving the business community through tactical supports, local and regional capacity building, events and partnerships, and engaging with prospective investors looking to invest in southwestern Ontario.

By offering superior business support and programming, SEDD can facilitate the creation of a municipal environment conducive to attracting new and diverse industries, supporting the expansion of existing businesses, and fostering entrepreneurial enterprises. This, in turn, helps diversify the city's tax base, enhance capital investment, and position Sarnia to successfully compete for industrial, commercial, and institutional development, ultimately contributing to the long-term prosperity of the city.

Strategic Goal: Deliver best-in-class business support & programming to drive economic prosperity, new investment, job creation, and business expansion.

Strategic Directions

['N'] New initiative for SEDD

['C'] Continuing initiative for SEDD

1. **['C'] Lead Business Retention & Expansion (BR+E) efforts** in Sarnia to cultivate relationships with businesses and keep informed on opportunities and challenges that can be pursued and addressed.

2. **[C] Develop & deliver programs and services that address business needs** based on interactions and feedback from Business Retention & Expansion (BR+E) efforts and other developments impacting the local economy. In the short-term, relevant programs may include:
 - Tariff response & trade diversification programs
 - Community Improvement Plans
 - Support accessing provincial and federal government funding programs
 - Addressing transportation connectivity
 - Hosting networking & training opportunities
3. **[C] Support and enable Downtown and Mitton Village revitalization** efforts and opportunities (i.e. Community Improvement Plans) to build on progress made to date. In the mid- to long-term, other areas of the city will be evaluated and invited to engage in similar local/community programs and initiatives. The SEDD will look for opportunities to partner with business and other community organizations on these efforts.
4. **[N] Help facilitate a business-friendly environment within City Hall** by liaising with other departments, identifying areas of improvement, and acting as a resource for businesses to welcome new investment, retention and expansion. Measure business satisfaction and communicate improvements to overcome negative perceptions resulting in a widely accepted open for business reputation.
5. **[N] Develop a targeted investment attraction program** by leveraging the city's strengths, refining industry value propositions and developing business cases to attract new investment to locate in Sarnia with an emphasis on building out the 402 Business Park and Sarnia Business & Research Park. Additional staff resources will be required and should be supported by a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the Sarnia-Lambton Economic Partnership to avoid program duplication.
6. **[N] Tourism Development** focusing on attracting and developing tourism assets (i.e. attractions, conference centre, etc.) liaising with tourism orientated businesses, and developing Sarnia centric tourism marketing efforts that can enhance visitation. This Strategic Direction would require a new, dedicated position within the SEDD to effectuate the type of change needed to see progress in this sector.

Defining the City's Role in Investment Attraction

The City of Sarnia has a vital role to play in investment attraction space, working in close collaboration with the Sarnia-Lambton Economic Partnership (SLEP) who has a regional investment attraction mandate.

SEDD should ensure Sarnia is strategically positioned to realize and convert investment leads/prospects being pursued. SEDD's role will involve marketing City-owned business parks, conducting industrial land management exercises, and supporting infrastructure improvements. SEDD should maintain a city-wide inventory of employment land and the associated servicing assets to provide quality and timely site selection support for prospective investors being generated by SEDD, SLEP, and other provincial and federal partners.

In addition, SEDD should have its own pro-active targeted investment attraction program that focuses specifically on activities that will generate leads for Sarnia specific opportunities. This program should ideally focus on areas where SLEP may not pursuing and align to Sarnia's strengths more directly.

SEDD should continuously monitor the city's economic competitiveness factors versus other comparable communities and ensure Sarnia remains an attractive proposition for investment. This includes addressing concerns from existing businesses, advocating for issues impacting businesses and investment opportunities, and working towards common goals with economic development ecosystem partners.

The department should simultaneously focus on how community improvements, such as waterfront development opportunities, enhance the quality of life in Sarnia. Furthermore, SEDD should continue to leverage the 'Invest Sarnia' branding and marketing strategy to highlight Sarnia's unique strengths and opportunities, particularly business development opportunities associated with City-owned assets.

Defining the City's Role in Tourism

To effectively establish and drive growth in tourism in Sarnia, the SEDD would require the establishment a new full-time permanent staff resource within the department.

this new position would focus on collaborative partnerships and capacity building with Tourism Sarnia-Lambton (TSL) to systematically align local initiatives with broader regional tourism strategies.

The new resource would prioritize development of local tourism assets, integrate tourism within the economic development department, and leveraging regional and

provincial resources including those provided by the Southwest Ontario Tourism Corporation (SWOTC aka RTO1). Additionally, this position would communicate and market Sarnia's support for local tourism-related businesses, facilitate investment in tourism infrastructure improvements, and focus on sustainable tourism development.

Within its current capacity, SEDD can support the tourism sector through business retention and expansion efforts by meeting with local businesses that contribute directly or indirectly to the tourism industry, including entertainment venues, arts and culture facilities, merchant organizations, and food and beverage establishments. Fundamentally, the SEDD and its new tourism position would serve as the main link between TSL, the local business, and other municipal departments to facilitate the implementation of tourism-friendly policies and streamlining permit processes for events/festivals that generate significant economic impact and tourism-related businesses.

FOCUS AREA 2

Maximize Potential of City-Owned Assets

In addition to offering standard economic development services for business, SEDD will continue to be responsible for marketing and business development services for a portfolio of City-owned economic assets. These assets, individually and collectively, provide new investment potential to the city as well as opportunities for generating both one-time and reoccurring revenue to the City.

Stakeholders indicated that City-owned asset development should continue to be a core focus for the SEDD and City, as these assets play a critical role within the city/county economic development ecosystem and the responsibility lies solely with the City to deliver. Over the next ten years, focusing on the business parks, waterfront, and harbour (Sarnia's three trophy assets) should be priority assets to support new business investment, job creation, and business expansions.

Detailed, long-term Master Plans (asset strategies) are already in place for the Waterfront, Airport, and Business Parks. These individual plans should continue to be executed. Each requires significant dedicated funding commitments from the City to advance the visions for each of these assets. Each asset requires the investment not only for the purposes of a good-state-of-repair, but to reposition it for future public benefit and business development opportunity.

Staff and financial resources will need to be extended to each asset to realize their full potential. Those with more limited capacity for economic growth and industrial development purposes should be repurposed or disposed of if no viable, sustainable models are realized within the next five years (Q1:2030).

Strategic Goal: Generate business development opportunities for the City's Business Parks, Downtown Waterfront, and Harbour to advance economic diversification efforts.

Strategy Directions

[N] New initiative for SEED

[C] Continuing initiative for SEED

The following strategy directions have been prioritized in order in which the SEED will have the greatest impact over the 10-year period of the EDMP.

1. **[C] Actively service, market, and facilitate sale of shovel-ready industrial land** in the City-owned business parks to generate new business growth and revenue. *(Dependent on Capital Funding for the Project)*
2. **[N] Advance the activation and commercialization opportunities within the downtown waterfront** as outlined in the Waterfront Master Plan, 2022, and in coordination with the relevant City departments working on the project. *(Dependent on Capital Funding for the Project)*
3. **[C] Lead Sarnia Harbour's marketing and business development activities** to generate increased economic impact for the community and position Sarnia as a key port of call within the Great Lakes network. *(Dependent on Capital Funding for the Harbour)*
4. **[C] Lead Sarnia Airport's marketing and business development activities** that increase airport activity and generate economic impact for the community. *(Dependent on Capital Funding for the Project)*

Focus Area 3

Amplify Sarnia's Competitive Advantages

The "Chemical Valley" image of the city is often viewed as Sarnia's defining feature. This perception of Sarnia is often defined as an industrial processing centre, rather than a prosperous, charming waterfront city with great parks, beaches and leafy neighbourhoods.

The city boasts a strategic location as a border city with proximity to the United States, situated along Highway 402 and Lake Huron. It has a skilled workforce, particularly in high-skilled trades, engineering and design, industrial safety and process innovation.

The City owns valuable land assets, including a picturesque waterfront, a deep-water harbor, airport, and business parks. Lambton College and the Western Sarnia-Lambton Research Park provide strong research and innovation capabilities. Sarnia also features attractive natural assets such as lakefront, beaches, and riverfront. These strengths position Sarnia as a city with significant potential for economic diversification, tourism development, and a high quality of life that require promotion and exposure.

Strategic Goal: Amplify Sarnia's combined strengths in industry, innovation and quality of life through deployment of the Economic Development brands.

Strategy Directions

[N] New initiative for SEDD

[C] Continuing initiative for SEDD

1. **[C] Continue to develop and enhance 'Invest Sarnia' and 'Explore Sarnia' brands** as dedicated economic development communication channels promoting Sarnia's advantage to prospective investors, residents, and visitors.
2. **[C] Conduct collaborative economic research and messaging development with community partners** to generate data driven insights and content that address local challenges and identify opportunities within the city to be amplified broadly.

3. **[N] Create an Ambassador Program** by recruiting local leaders, business professionals, and community advocates to promote the city as an attractive place for investment, business, and skilled talent, leveraging their networks and credibility to amplify Sarnia's advantage.

FOCUS AREA 4

Lead and Support Impactful & Collaborative Partnerships

Sarnia is embedded within a regional Lambton County ecosystem of economic development partners that can be leveraged to optimize resources, share knowledge and expertise, and overcome limitations.

Economic Development partners were engaged through the development of the EDMP and recognized the need for collaboration to deliver the EDMP. The City must leverage these resources to provide the greatest positive impact to the economy and utilizing partnerships.

Goal: Develop and leverage a dynamic & collaborative economic development ecosystem to advance the City's economic vision in tandem with County (Lambton), regional (southwestern Ontario), and provincial/federal efforts for job creation, skills development, infrastructure, and investment.

Strategy Directions

[N] New initiative for SEED

[C] Continuing initiative for SEED

1. **[N] Formalize Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) agreements between the City and Sarnia-Lambton Economic Partnership (SLEP) and the City and Tourism Sarnia Lambton (TSL)** to ensure the SEED's activities are complemented by regional partner organizations.
 - o **The City/ SLEP Agreement** should acknowledge that SEED will lead business retention and expansion (BR+E) efforts within the city and cooperate on SLEP's strategic cluster development business engagement activities. SEED will rely on SLEP for major investment attraction programming while providing site selection services and conducting other targeted investment attraction efforts to meet specific Sarnia needs. SEED will continue to be responsible for land development

and industrial land inventorying while the City will rely on SLEP to continue to provide resident attraction and workforce development services and initiatives. Information sharing and communication protocols should be established to ensure both parties are well informed on each others' activities and business intelligence sharing for mutually beneficial outcomes.

- **The City/ TSL Agreement** should acknowledge that through the EDMP strategic directions, SEDD will be considering a more robust tourism development function which will include asset development, investment readiness, hospitality business support, and new marketing efforts designed to improve visitation and the external profile for Sarnia. This is dependent upon the addition of a new full-time permanent position in the department.
- 2. **[N] Building meaningful relationships with neighbouring First Nations communities** to advance economic reconciliation. SEDD will work to connect local First Nations with key City economic activities, priorities, and plans to help ensure that their economic interests are supported.
- 3. **[C] Continue to explore opportunities and partnerships for transportation mobility** through multimodal integration, infrastructure upgrades, and service optimization that will improve Sarnia's connectivity to the rest of the province and beyond.
- 4. **[C] Strengthen and leverage partnerships with Sarnia's regional innovation, small business and entrepreneurship ecosystem partners** to promote and support entrepreneurship, scale up businesses, and adoptive innovative technologies and practices that will create dynamic new business creation and growth in Sarnia.
- 5. **[N] Act as a liaison between Lambton College and Sarnia's business community** to support responsive and flexible training and education programs that benefit the institution, workforce and business community.

Implementation & Resourcing

Implementation

The SEDD will be responsible for overseeing and implementing the EDMP in partnership with other municipal departments and economic development partners throughout Lambton County and beyond.

A short-term (1-3 year) action plan has been developed based on the focus areas, objectives and actions. It will serve as a multi-year work plan for the department with detailed actions and activities to advance the strategic recommendations within each focus area.

Following the completion of the short-term (1-3 year) implementation plan, the SEDD will evaluate and recalibrate to ensure the city is tracking towards the vision and strategic goals of the EDMP. Medium and long-term implementation plans to guide the department's workplan will be developed by the SEDD as the EDMP advances.

Resourcing

The EDMP is a long-term plan intended to shape and guide the economic direction of the city over the next 10 years. The success of the EDMP is dependent on long-term investments and funding commitments being made by the City to realize the strategic goals and direction presented in the plan.

It would be unrealistic for SEDD to deliver the full extent of the EDMP under current staffing and budget levels. Additional staff and funding will be required to introduce new initiatives and programming presented in the EDMP without negatively impacting core economic development services and programs currently offered by SEDD.

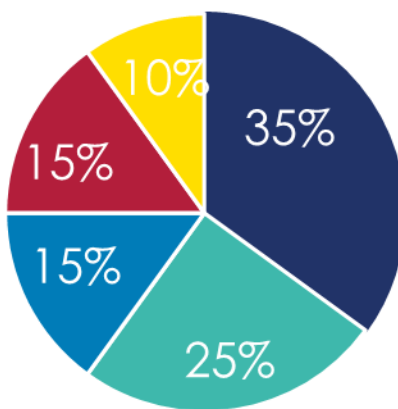
In addition to annual municipal funding, grants can play a fundamental role in assisting municipal economic development delivery. Grants can provide critical financial leverage that enable municipalities to pursue projects and initiatives that may otherwise be unattainable through limited current operating and capital budget capacity. However, grants alone cannot be solely relied upon as most grants undergo a competitive process and require matching funds.

SEDD will continue to pursue and leverage provincial/federal economic development funding grant programs where available, specifically those that support economic development programming, municipal development and infrastructure investment. SEDD has demonstrated past success in pursuing, obtaining, disseminating

and co-ordinating government grant opportunities as new monies become available.

The chart below highlights a breakdown of the recommended allocation of time the Department should assign – in general terms - to each of the 4 areas of focus.

Department's Recommended Time Allocation to the Four (4) Focus Areas



- Execute Best-in-class Business Support & Programming
- Maximize Potential of City-owned Assets
- Amplify Sarnia's Competitive Advantage
- Lead and Support Impactful & Collaborative Partnerships
- Administration and Other Department Activities

Key Performance Metric Tracking

SEDD will develop an Annual Review document which highlights the department's annual activities, progress on priority areas, and other relevant economic indicators that will be published and communicated to Council and Stakeholders.

The following are measurements for the four focus areas of the EDMP.

Best-in-class Business Support and Programs

- # of businesses engaged annually
- # of new company arrivals
- # of business visits conducted
- # of expansions and investments
- # of CIP applications approved
- # of business support events hosted

Amplify Sarnia's Advantage

- # of site visits conducted
- Website and Social Media traffic
- # of advertising campaigns launched

Impactful & Collaborative Partnerships

- Participation on boards and/or committees with ecosystem partners
- # of referrals to partner organizations
- # of joint activities conducted

Maximize Potential of City-owned Assets

- # of business development activities conducted for assets
- # of business park enquires received and serviced
- Annual Airport and Harbour activity

Risk Acknowledgment

With any ‘master plan’ there are inherent risks both known and unknown at the time of development that may affect the intended outcomes of the plan. The EDMP has been developed to factor in risks that may impact the SEDD’s ability to deliver on the four focus areas and strategy directions laid out in the plan.

To mitigate risk, the strategic directions and actions SEDD will undertake as part of the EDMP have been developed to be realistic and feasible economic development responsibilities within reasonable control. While others may be outside SEDD’s control, SEDD should be empowered by the City to leverage City-wide executive leadership to advance strategic directions that may cross departmental boundaries and/or influence partner organizations for the economy’s benefit.

The focus area and strategic directions were developed to be broad based allowing SEDD leadership to respond to economic changes and risks that are unforeseen while retaining the ability to continue to deliver value and work towards the ten-year vision.

A well-known internal City risk that has been at the forefront of the development of the EDMP has been the City’s unfunded capital projects for City-owned business parks, waterfront, harbour, and airport assets. The EDMP process confirmed that these assets are seen by the community as critical elements that will advance the economic vision for Sarnia. Stakeholders across the board expect follow-through, including a clear commitment toward developing these assets.

Without the capital funding commitments to developing these assets, the ability of the SEDD to pursue and realize business development opportunities on the assets will be significantly limited and expectations should be adjusted. Municipal capital funding commitments are required for SEDD to advance the development of these assets as part of this plan.

Furthermore, the EDMP recommends several new activities and/or initiatives including tourism development and investment attraction which currently do not have SEDD staff resource capacity to undertake. These activities will require new dedicated funding in both staffing and associated budget availability (i.e. marketing, travel, advertising, etc.). Without new resources allocated to these initiatives, limited results can be expected from SEDD in these areas and will depend more exclusively on partner organizations to deliver results.

From an external risk perspective, the anticipated acceleration of the energy transition over the next ten years continues to be a concern for Sarnia's economy which has a dependence on the petrochemical industry. A balanced approach which supports existing industrial strengths in the transition while simultaneously fostering emerging sectors is critical. The EDMP acknowledges SEDD has a role to play in contributing to Sarnia's diversification efforts, but unknown risks and decisions associated with global energy demands are far greater than SEDD's ability to control or predict.



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Metrics**

CITY OF SARNIA 10-YEAR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT MASTER PLAN

Appendix A – ‘What Was Heard’ Document

City of Sarnia, Ontario

Prepared for City of Sarnia

December 16, 2024



This document is available in alternative formats upon request by contacting:
info@urbanMetrics.ca
416-351-8585 (1-800-505-8755)



urbanMetrics inc.
15 Toronto St, Suite 602
Toronto ON M5C 2E3
Tel: 416-351-8585
urbanMetrics.ca

December 16, 2024

Kelly Provost
Director of Economic Development
City of Sarnia

RE: City of Sarnia 10-Year Economic Development Master Plan – Appendix A –
‘What Was Heard’ Document (City of Sarnia, Ontario)

urbanMetrics is pleased to provide the City of Sarnia with this summary of our comprehensive engagement on matters pertaining to economic growth and prosperity. The materials contained in this report summarize the viewpoints and expectations of residents, businesses, community development partners and local elected officials in the City of Sarnia.

This report summarizes “what was heard” from local stakeholders and the public at large about current economic conditions, and the desire to see more deliberate, and proactive measures by City Staff and elected officials to help stimulate population growth, support economic diversification and improve the competitive position for local businesses and key institutional anchors.

The City of Sarnia is currently undertaking a 10-Year Economic Development Master Plan. The EDMP will serve as a road map for how the City of Sarnia’s Economic Development Department will help support Council’s Strategic Plan.

This report summarizes the engagement of residents and leaders, including:

- One-on-one interviews with Mayor, Council Community Development Professionals, Business and Industry Partners, neighbouring First Nations (x21)
- Focus Groups with Community Organizations and Business Leaders (x4)
- Public Information Sessions (x2, In-Person and Virtual)
- Online Survey of Residents (Fall 2024)



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Overview

This “What Was Heard” document is a summary of the engagement phase of the City of Sarnia Economic Development Master Plan project. This phase of the project gathered the perspectives of key stakeholders in the local economy and community, including elected officials, businesses and organizations who play key roles in the economic development ecosystem (local employers, associations, etc.), and members of the public.

A variety of methods were used to solicit feedback from the diverse groups of stakeholders consulted. Firstly, the Mayor and Council Members, as well as key economic development ecosystem partners identified with the aid of the City of Sarnia, were invited to attend 1-hour one-on-one interviews. The interviewees were provided with a standardized set of questions in advance to help prepare their thoughts and responses.

In addition to one-on-one interviews, economic development, community development and business leaders from a variety of industries were brought together for roundtable (focus group) discussions, including: Retail, Arts & Tourism, Community Wellness, Industry & Agriculture, and Development & Transportation. Members of the public were also invited to share their perspective at sessions held both in person and on line. All sessions were augmented by real-time polling software which helped collect, tabulate and validate various topics of discussion

The data collected from our focus groups are presented in a quantitative format where available and applicable. The rest of the engagement is summarized in a thematic review that highlights the recurring themes and areas of interest that crystallized throughout the engagement process.

The structure of this report is intended to summarize each stream of engagement:

1. One on One Interviews (2 streams, 21 participants)
 - Mayor & Council
 - Economic Development Ecosystem Partners
2. Focus Groups (5 sessions, 76 participants, * includes public session)
3. Online Survey (713 responses)
4. SWOT: Summary of all responses

[1.] 1-on-1 Interviews

Mayor & Council

urbanMetrics extended invitations for one-on-one interviews with every City of Sarnia council member as well as the Mayor. Elected officials were able to respond to the request and participated in a standardized format interview series with members of the consulting team. To maintain anonymity and the integrity of individual responses, detailed notes from each conversation have been aggregated and distilled into key themes as summarized below:

Vision and Economic Outlook

- Transitioning from a fossil fuel-based economy to a more diversified one, including more attention on biofuels and alternative energy options
- Leveraging the existing skilled workforce to attract new industries
- Upholding its status as a high-quality small city with good-paying jobs
- Improving the utilization of City owned assets like the waterfront

Identified Economic Strengths of Sarnia

- Transportation hub (2nd biggest railyard in Ontario, bridge to US, highway access)
- Educated and skilled workforce
- Affordable cost of living
- Geographic location (border city, largest on Lake Huron)
- Existing industrial complex and infrastructure

Identified Economic Weaknesses of Sarnia

- Geographical isolation within Ontario
- Aging workforce and population
- Lack of shovel-ready land for development
- Reputation for not being open for business
- Stagnant population growth
- Underutilized assets (e.g., waterfront, airport)

Top Economic Opportunities for Sarnia to Capitalize On

- Diversification of the economy, particularly in green/alternative energy sectors
- Leveraging the skilled workforce to attract new industries

- Developing tourism potential, especially along the waterfront
- Remote work opportunities due to affordability (companies in other locations)

Identified Challenges to Sarnia’s Economic Growth

- Potential job losses due to changes in the oil and gas industry (e.g., Line 5 pipeline issues)
- Aging workforce and population decline
- Elevated US border issues (e.g., security, mass deportation, water diversion)
- Attracting and retaining businesses and young people

What Role Should the City Have in Tourism?

- Focus on creating/supporting destination attractions, particularly along the waterfront
- Nurture and attract tourism investment
- Develop tourism infrastructure (e.g., convention center)
- Work collaboratively with Tourism Sarnia Lambton, but take a more active role in developing tourism assets

What Role Should the City Have in Investment Attraction?

- The City should have a lead role in attracting investment while leveraging SLEP’s resources
- Improve collaboration and communication between the City and SLEP
- Focus on Sarnia’s specific needs while supporting regional economic development

What Role Should the City have in Non-Residential Land Development?

- Be more proactive in providing shovel-ready development lots for industries of all sizes
- Invest in servicing land and infrastructure to attract businesses (expedite development of Sarnia’s business parks)
- Streamline processes to make Sarnia more business-friendly

Priority Functions for Sarnia’s Economic Development Department

- New customer attraction
- Asset development (e.g., harbor, airport, waterfront, business parks)
- Supporting new job creation and growing existing businesses

Priority Activities and Function for the City of Sarnia Economic Development Department

- Act as a liaison between City Hall and the business community
- Set standards and create landmarks for development
- Focus on downtown revitalization and densification
- Facilitate affordable housing initiatives
- Nurture existing assets and make them more dynamic

Other “Important Considerations” for the 10-Year Economic Development Master Plan

- Explore more collaborative opportunities with First Nations communities
- Address the future of the airport
- Support the Research Park and Lambton College
- Develop strategies to attract and retain international students and immigrants
- Focus on bigger, more transformative projects that can shape Sarnia’s future

Economic Development Ecosystem Partners

The consulting team extended interview requests to development ecosystem partners who are all contributors to the local economy and could be considered organizational stakeholders and future collaborators for the ongoing development of Sarnia. One-one-one interviews were held through November and December 2024.

The key themes from Sarnia’s economic development ecosystem partners are summarized as follows:

Vision for Sarnia’s Economic in 5-10 Years (2030-2035)

- Diversification beyond petrochemical industry
- Attraction of new investments and businesses
- Growth in technology and innovation sectors
- Emphasis on sustainability and clean energy
- Improved quality of life and amenities

Identified Economic Strengths of Sarnia

- Petrochemical and industrial infrastructure
- Skilled workforce, especially in trades
- Strategic location (border city, access to water)

- Lambton College and research capabilities
- Waterfront and natural assets

Identified Economic Weaknesses of Sarnia

- Overreliance on petrochemical industry
- Lack of economic diversification
- Limited investment-ready land
- Regulatory and bureaucratic challenges (municipal red tape)
- Negative perception and branding issues with the City

Top Economic Opportunities for Sarnia to Capitalize On (ranked)

- Leveraging existing industrial infrastructure for new sectors
- Developing the waterfront and tourism potential
- Attracting technology and innovation companies
- Expanding into sustainable and clean energy industries
- Capitalizing on the oversized load corridor and port facilities

Identified Challenges to Sarnia’s Economic Growth

- Lack of population growth and talent retention
- Transition from ‘traditional’ industries
- Infrastructure limitations (e.g., transportation, housing)
- Political alignment and support for economic initiatives
- Competition from other jurisdictions

Most Important City-Owned Assets (ranked)

- Waterfront (most frequently mentioned)
- Harbour and port facilities
- Business parks and industrial lands
- Airport (mixed opinions on its importance)

Jobs and Industries that Economic Development Should Attract

- Clean energy and sustainability-related industries
- Technology and innovation companies
- Advanced manufacturing
- Logistics and transportation
- Agri-tech and bio-based industries

Strategic Priorities and Opportunities for Collaboration

- Improved collaboration between economic development partners
- Infrastructure development and investment readiness
- Workforce development and talent attraction
- Support for entrepreneurship and small businesses
- Marketing and promotion of Sarnia’s assets

Priority Functions for Sarnia’s Economic Development Department (ranked)

- Business Attraction
- Infrastructure improvements
- Asset development
- Supporting new job creation
- Growing existing businesses

Marketing Activities

- Collaborative marketing efforts with regional partners
- Focused promotion of Sarnia’s strengths and assets
- Targeted marketing to specific industries and investors
- Improved branding and perception management
- Leveraging digital and social media platforms

Other “Important Considerations” for the 10-Year Economic Development Master Plan

- Enhanced collaboration between economic development partners
- Focus on entrepreneurship and innovation
- Addressing housing and quality of life issues
- Improving transportation and connectivity
- Incorporating sustainability and environmental initiatives
- Strengthening relationships with First Nations communities

[2.] Focus Groups

NB: This section includes input gathered through the Public Open House process

urbanMetrics conducted a series of in-person focus groups between November 26 and 27th 2024. Each focus group used an interactive series of polling questions providing both quantitative and qualitative responses. This resulted in an interactive session allowing each attendee to participate, which provided transparent and instantaneous results, allowing discussions to be focused on issues that needed discussions.

A total of 76 individuals participated in the focus groups divided into the following industry or sector categories:

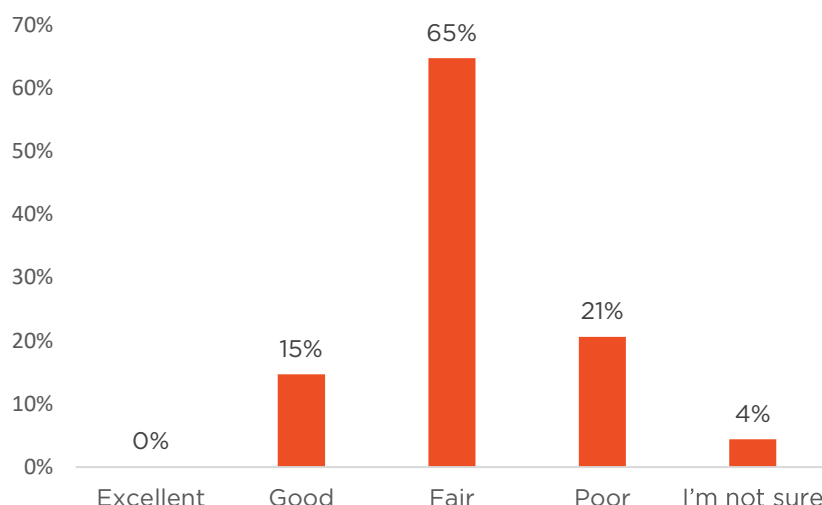
1. Retail, Arts & Tourism (9 participants, by invite)
2. Community Wellness (15 participants, by invite)
3. Industry & Agriculture (19 participants, by invite)
4. Development & Transportation (23 participant, by invite)
5. Public (13 participants in-person, 0 participants virtual, open session)

The section below highlights the consolidated results from the five groups sessions.



How would you rank the current condition of Sarnia’s economy? (n=76)

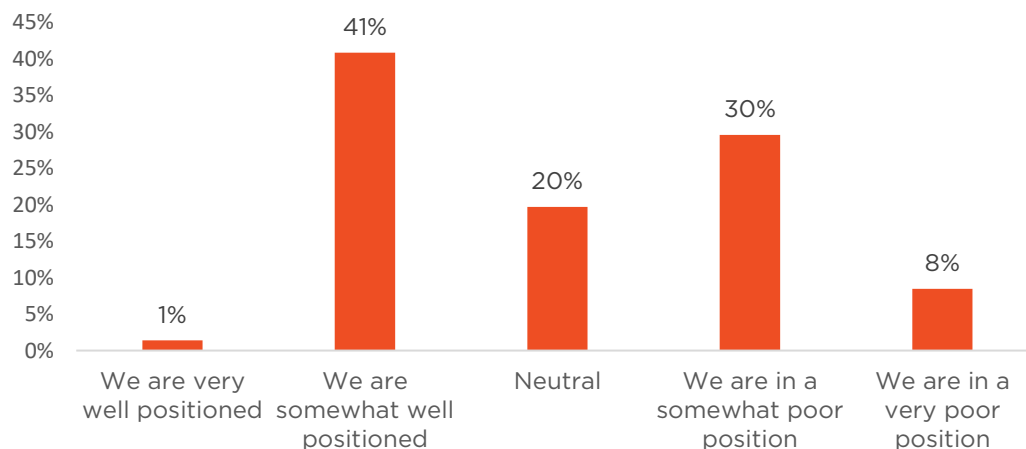
The majority of focus group participants ranked the current condition of Sarnia’s economy as fair. The question was intended to provide a baseline to understand where participants currently see the state of Sarnia’s economy.



SOURCE: urbanMetrics inc., focus group sessions.

Do you think that Sarnia is well positioned for future economic growth and prosperity over the next 10 years? (n=76)

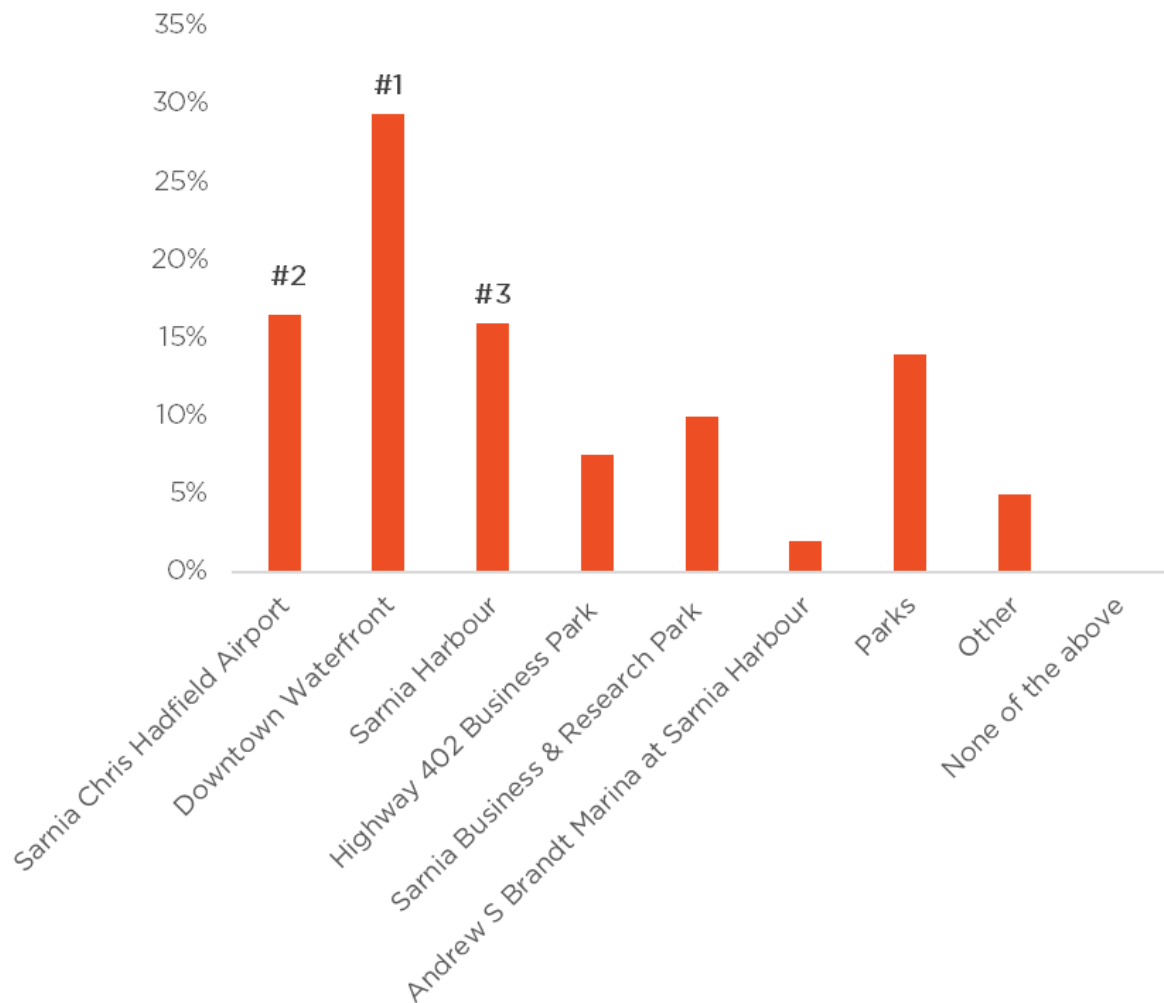
Focus group participants tended to see Sarnia being somewhat well positioned/neutral for future economic growth and prosperity over the next 10 years.



SOURCE: urbanMetrics inc., focus group sessions.

In your opinion which are the most important City-owned assets that will drive future economic prosperity in Sarnia? (n=76)

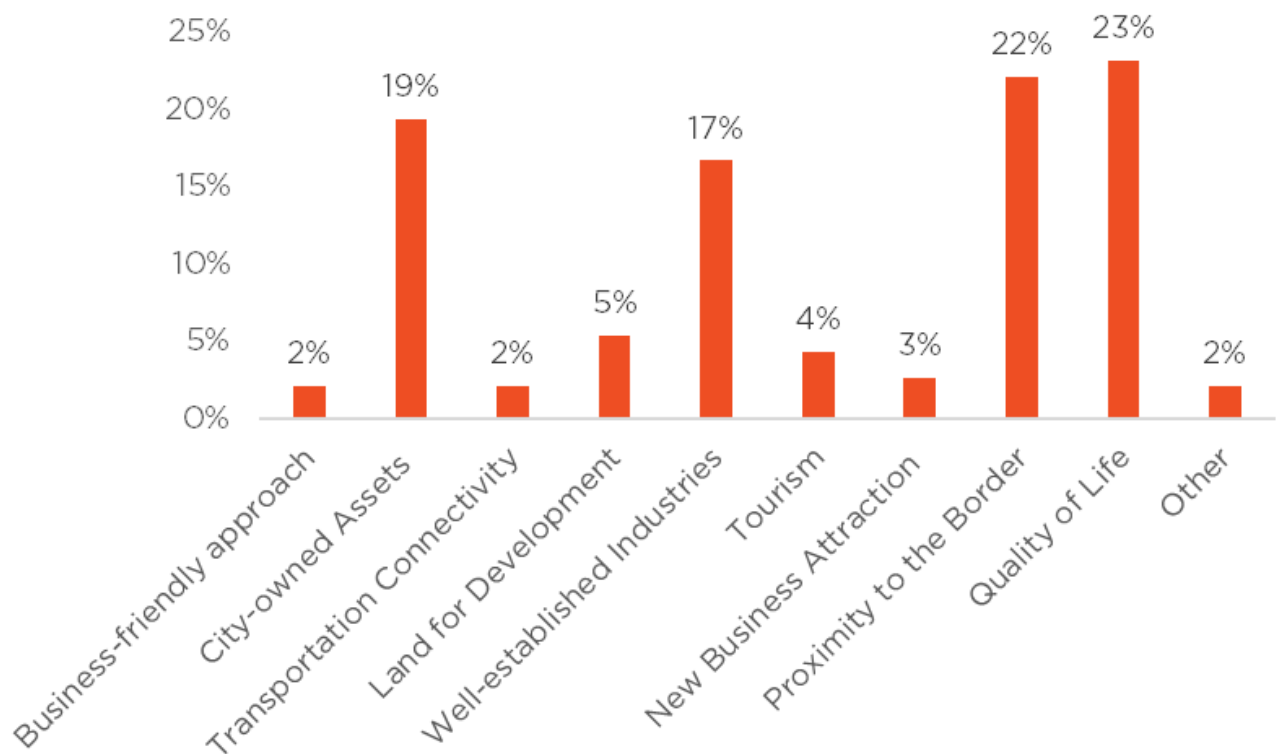
Overwhelmingly, focus group participants identified the City’s downtown waterfront as the most important City-owned asset that can help drive future economic prosperity followed behind with the airport and harbour.



SOURCE: urbanMetrics inc., focus group sessions.

What do you think are the top three (3) strengths that make Sarnia a great place to live and do business? (n=76)

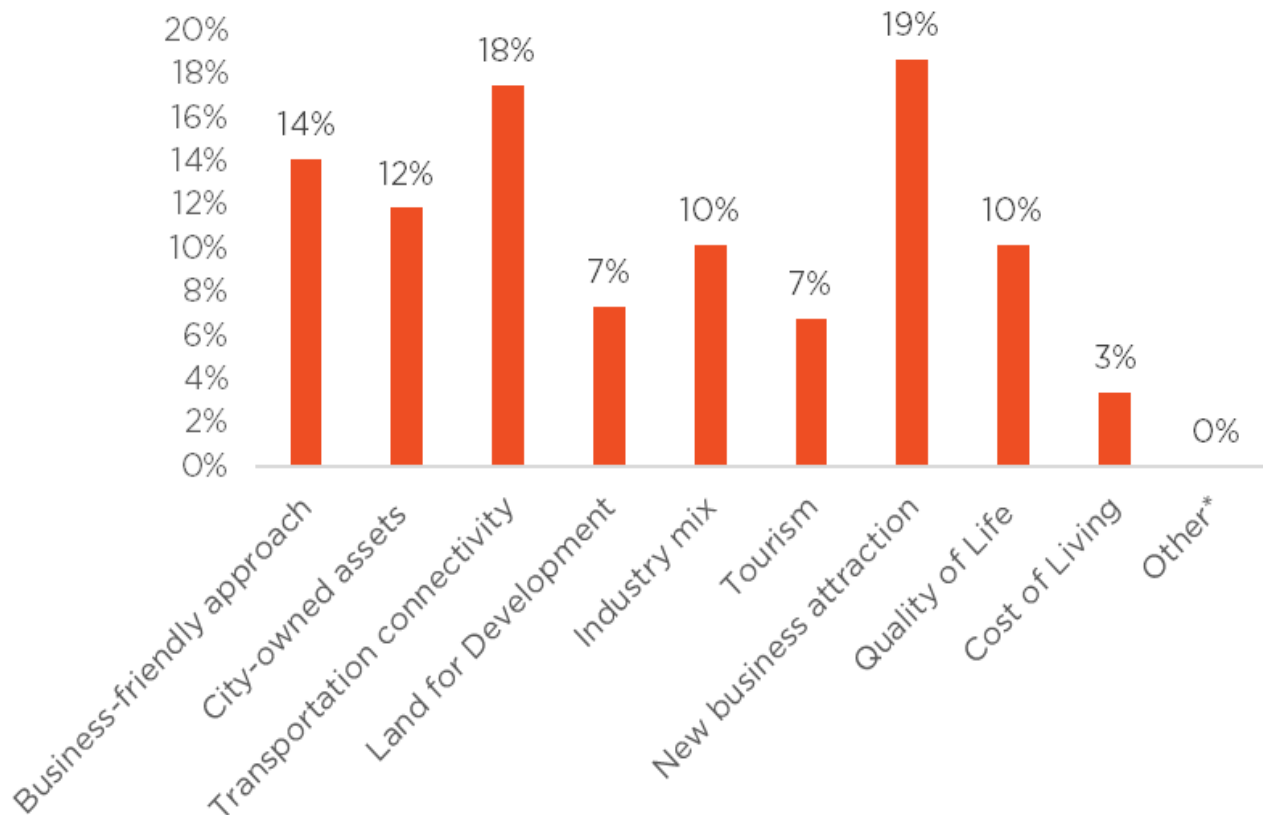
Focus group participants identified Sarnia’s quality of life, proximity to the border and it’s City-owned assets as being the top three strengths that make it a great place to live and do business.



SOURCE: urbanMetrics inc., focus group sessions.

What are the top three (3) areas that can be improved to make Sarnia a better place to live and do business? (n=76)

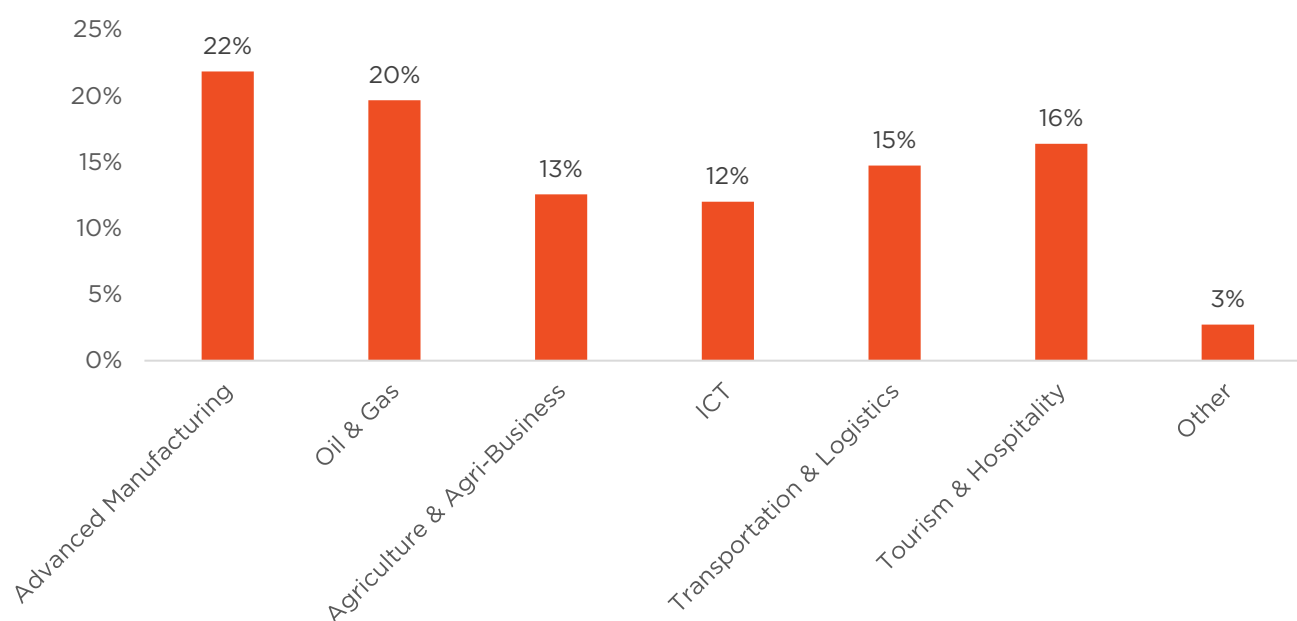
The top three (3) areas that focus group participants identified that would make Sarnia a better place to live and do business are new business attraction, transportation connectivity (both within Sarnia as well as in and out of Sarnia) as well as a business-friendly approach within the City.



SOURCE: urbanMetrics inc., focus group sessions.

What industries do you think have the best opportunity to prosper in Sarnia in the future? (n=76)

The top three (3) industries that focus group participants think that have the best opportunity to prosper in Sarnia in the future include: advanced manufacturing, oil and gas, and tourism and hospitality.



SOURCE: urbanMetrics inc., focus group sessions.

What transformative opportunities (e.g. emerging sectors, high-growth industries) are out there that Sarnia is well-positioned to capture?

This section of the focus group solicited participants perspectives on sectors that represent potential growth areas for the local economy or could present opportunities for the entrenchment or development of key comparative advantages in the foreseeable future. These responses are reflective of feedback provided by participants in the identified focus group sessions.

Retail, Arts & Tourism Focus Responses:

- Capacity - many organizations supporting this space - need collaboration
- Cross border attraction
- Gallery / food & drink

- Indoor attractions
- Our festivals
- Pop up shops / Food trucks on waterfront

Community Wellness Focus Group Responses:

- College hospitality
- E-commerce
- Energy sector
- Hydrogen
- Leveraging immigration (for example healthcare sector in labour force)

Industry & Agriculture Focus Group Responses:

- Agricultural growth and modernization
- Bio-industry
- Bio-industry in food and nutrition ingredients
- Crypto-currency
- Carbon sequestration thru agriculture
- Expanding value chain from existing businesses
- Exports via oversized load corridor
- Heavy equipment
- Hydrogen and CCS hubs
- Low Carbon fuels

Development & Transportation Focus Group Responses:

- Alternative energy
- Green energy
- Housing
- Clean energy R&D
- Transportation
- Electric Vehicle battery plants / Hydrogen gas for vehicles
- Green Energy - capitalize in energy industry already in place
- Hydrogen for transportation
- Hydrogen fuels
- Intermodal transportation
- Railway support
- Tier 2/3 data centres

Public Open House Responses:

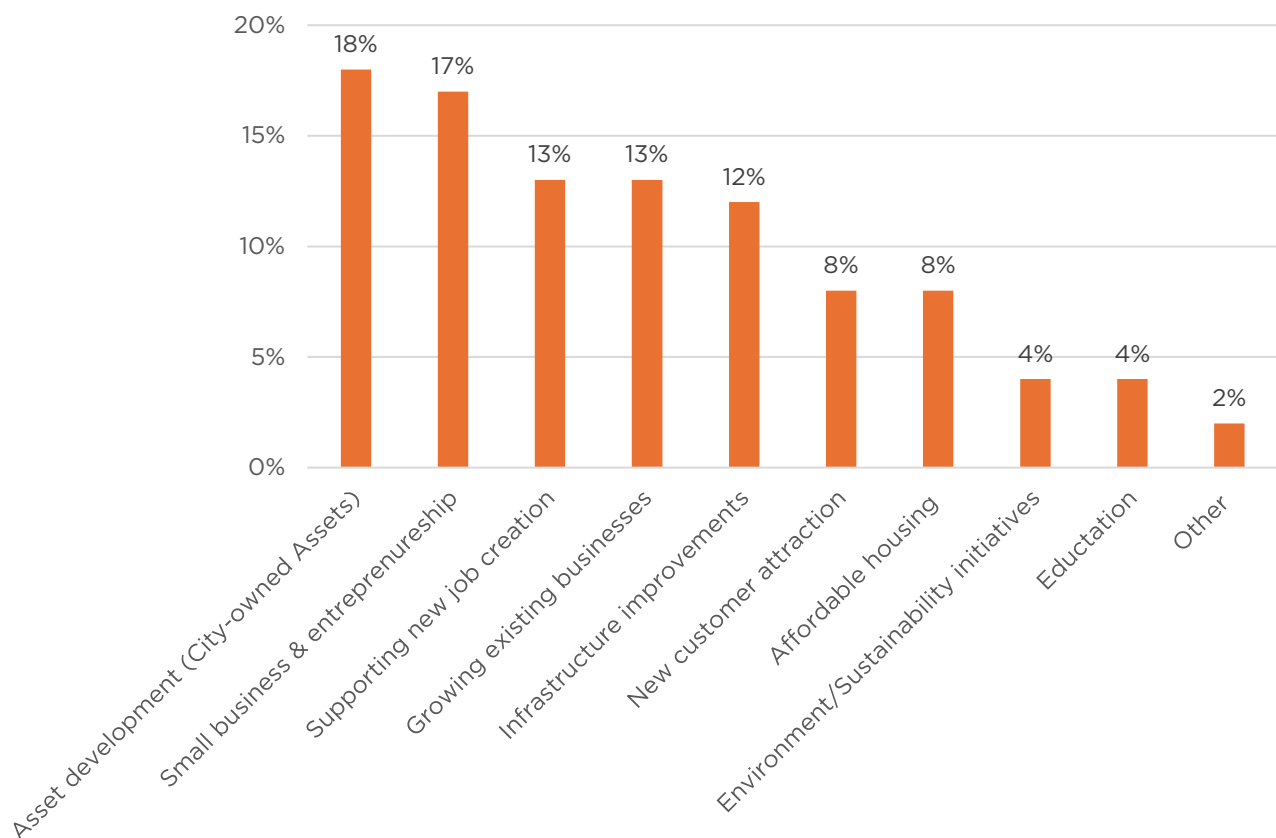
- Bio-technologies

- I.T and technology development
- Remote work
- Trade type industries
- Transitioning workforce from oil & gas support to other energy-based industries
- Virtual employment

What are the three (3) functions you would like to see Sarnia’s Economic Development department prioritize over the next ten years?

Focus group participants were asked to help identify priority functions for the City’s economic development department.

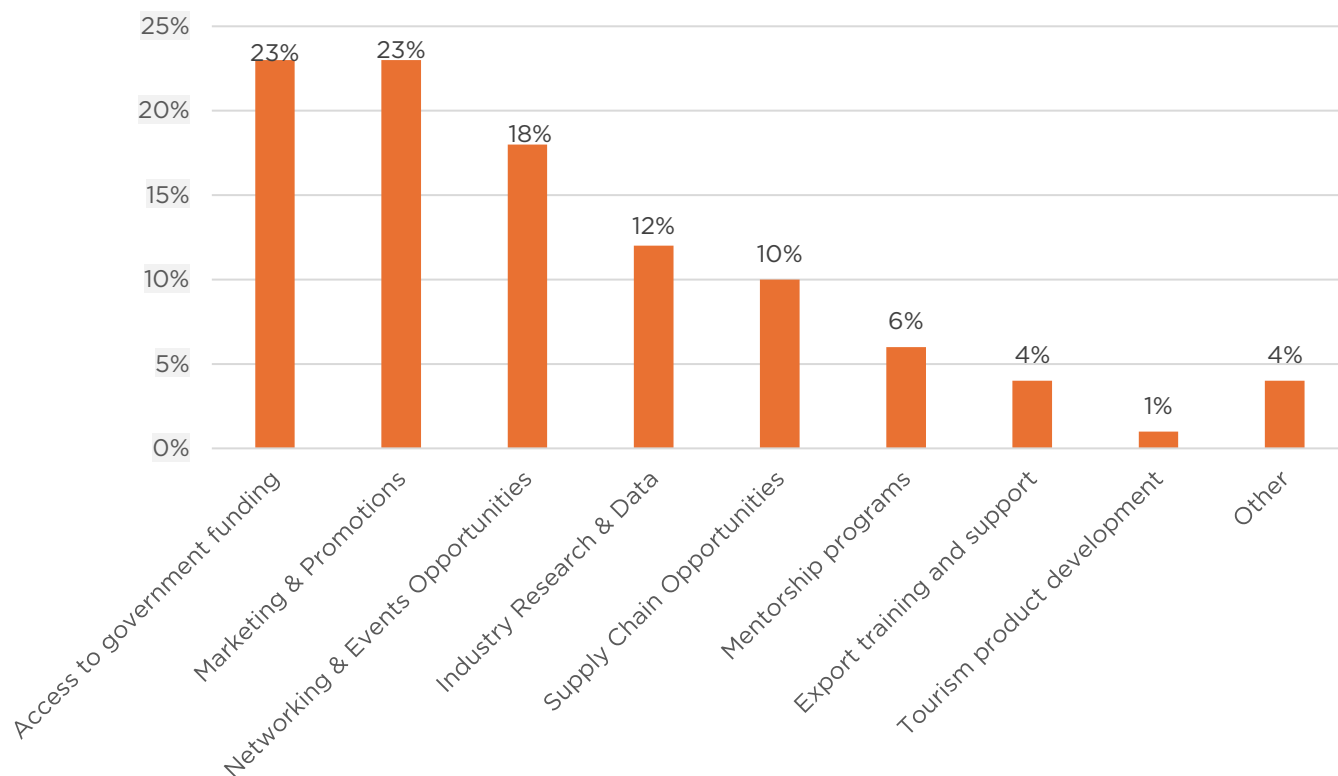
Participants identified the management of City-owned assets (i.e., harbour, business parks, waterfront, etc.) as the top priority followed closely by small business and entrepreneurship services and efforts to support new job creation and support in growing existing businesses.



SOURCE: urbanMetrics inc., focus group sessions.

What type of support and materials are you looking for which the City’s Economic Development Department could help deliver?

Focus group participants identified access to government funding, marketing and promotions, and networking and event opportunities as the top three types of support and materials they would be looking for the City’s Economic Development Department to deliver on.



SOURCE: urbanMetrics inc., focus group sessions.

If the City of Sarnia could resolve only one issue or challenge impeding business growth and investment in our economy, what would it be?

This portion of the focus group sessions focused on prioritizing the range of challenges and opportunities facing the city. Participants were asked to pick their single highest priority issue or challenge that they felt would make the biggest positive contribution to the local economy and community if addressed. These responses are edited for privacy and clarity.

Retails, Arts and Tourism Responses:

- Collaboration
- Costs
- Local politics
- Leadership focus and collaboration
- Perception/ image/ brand
- Red tape
- Start-up costs

Community Wellness Responses:

- Be a welcoming community on all levels
- Be open for business
- Local politics
- Investment ready land
- Drive more external investment including tourism through targeted infrastructure enhancements
- Housing
- Improved cooperation and communications between partners to reduce redundancy and streamline service
- Taking more risks
- Transportation options
- More collaborative politics
- More simplified policies

Industry & Agriculture Responses:

- Advocacy for investment in sustainability
- Help leverage federal and provincial funds for investment
- Industry diversity

- Local politics
- Improved customer service in accessing municipal permits, licenses and approvals
- Promote exports
- Protecting their small businesses
- Rebranding the community to attract
- Shrinking government oversight
- Tax incentives

Development and Transportation Responses:

- Affordable/ access to housing
- Corporate Buy-in to the Plan
- Local politics
- Cut Red Tape
- Welcoming innovation
- Local officials should support and follow through on expert advice
- Facilitating development
- Give strong customer powers to the planning department
- Lack of residential development
- Make Sarnia’s business parks investment-ready

Public Open House Responses:

- More collaboration on council
- Administrative challenges
- Change image and perception
- Improve local government partnerships - City/ Provincial / Federal
- Improve transportation connectivity

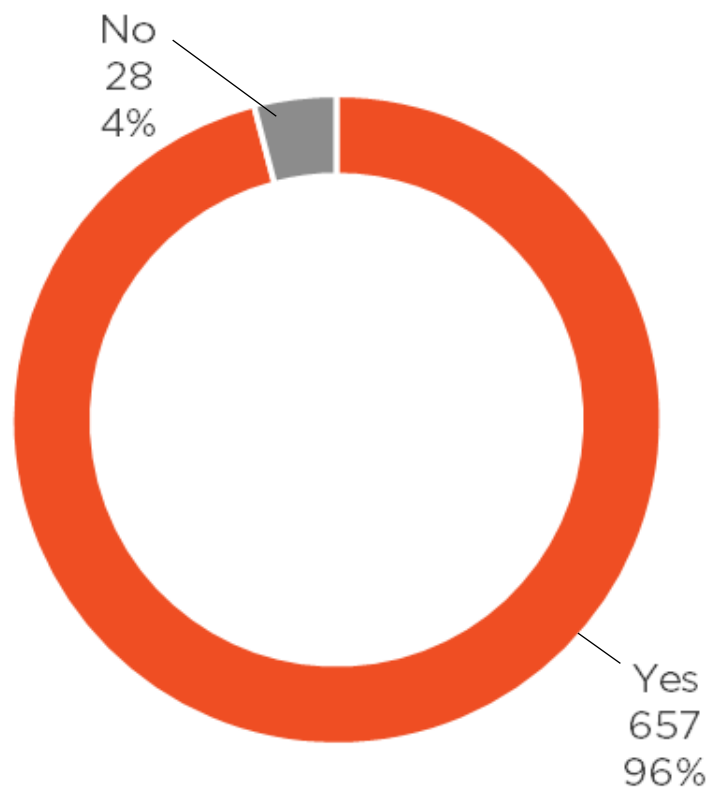
[3.] Online Survey

Who Responded?

In total, the public survey garnered 713 submissions during its open period from October 21st to December 2nd.

The vast majority of respondents (96%) indicated that they were residents of the City of Sarnia.

Public Survey Response by Residency

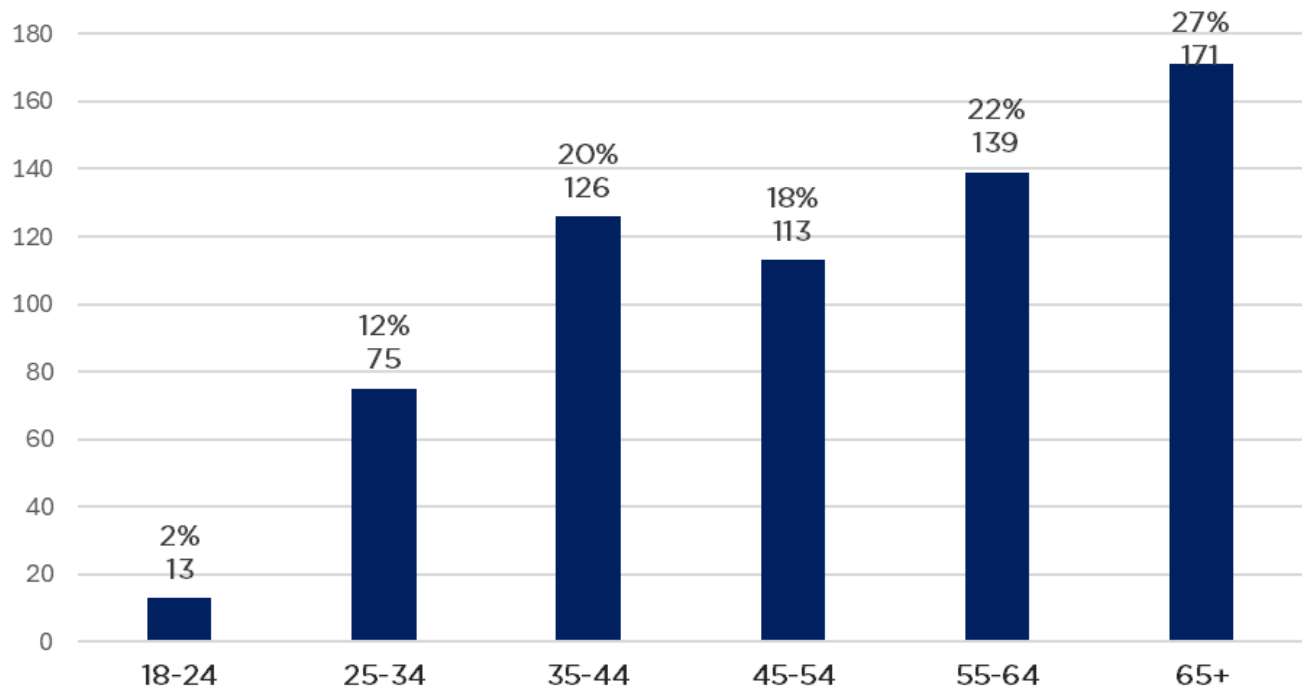


SOURCE: urbanMetrics' Public Survey with City of Sarnia

NOTE: The number of responses for individual questions in the survey may vary due to survey piping and response optionality.

Age of Survey Respondents

The ages of respondents were relatively well distributed, with 12% between 25 and 34, 20% between 35 and 44, 18% between 45 and 54, 22% between 55-64, and 27% 65 or older. The most under-represented group was 18-24-year-olds, who comprised approximately 2% of respondents.



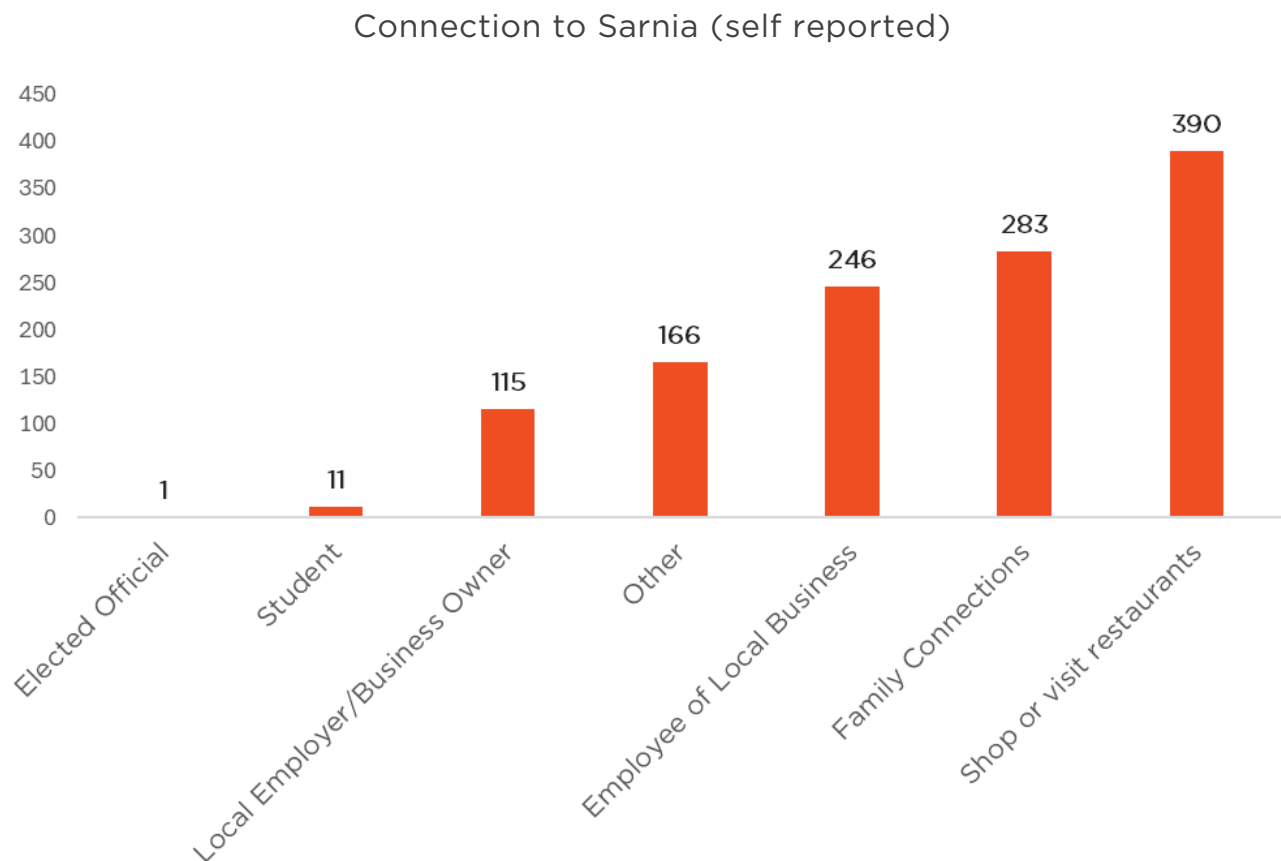
SOURCE: urbanMetrics' Public Survey with City of Sarnia

Connection to Sarnia

Respondents were connected to the city of Sarnia in a variety of ways.

As most are residents, they selected that they shop at or visit local stores and restaurants, while many retain other family connections to the city, were employed by local businesses, own or operate local businesses, or attend school/college (students).

Respondents who selected ‘other’ included those who previously worked in Sarnia and elected to stay when they decided to retire, those who relocated for a spouse or partner’s family connections or career opportunities, and previous students who decided to stay after completing their studies.

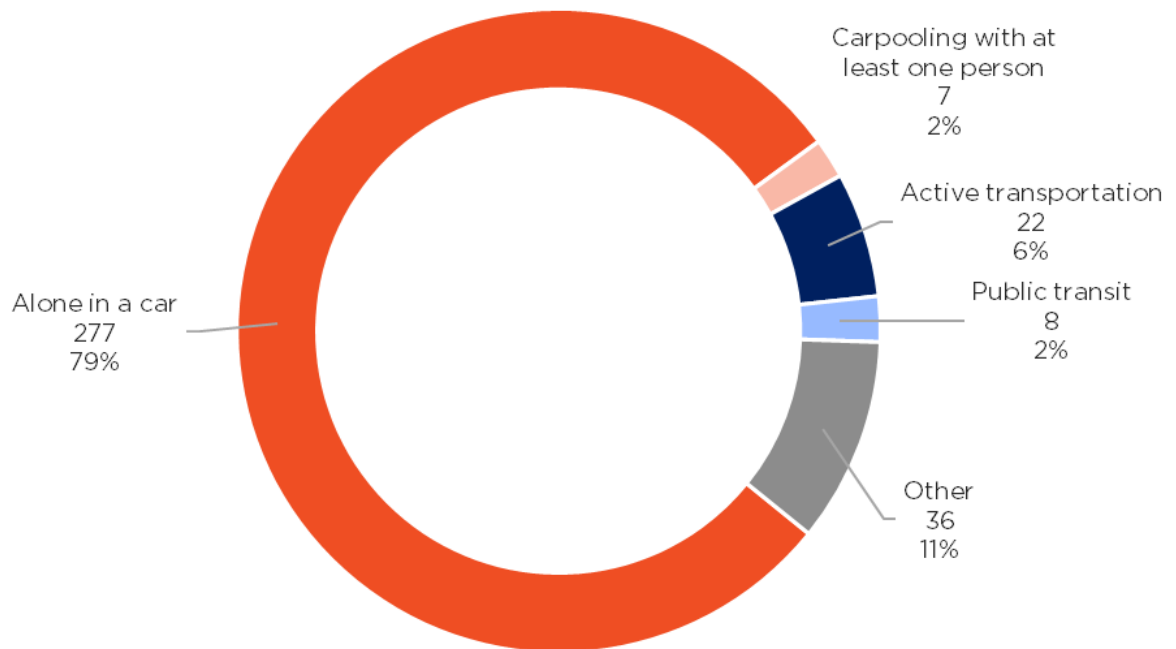


SOURCE: Q5 What is your connection to Sarnia? (Select up to 3)

Mobility & Commuting

A significant majority of employed respondents indicated that they drive alone (79%) to commute, with other popular alternatives including work from home and walking (Other 11%), active transportation such as walking or biking (6%), and public transit and carpooling (both 2%).

Method of Commuting (respondents primary mode of transport)

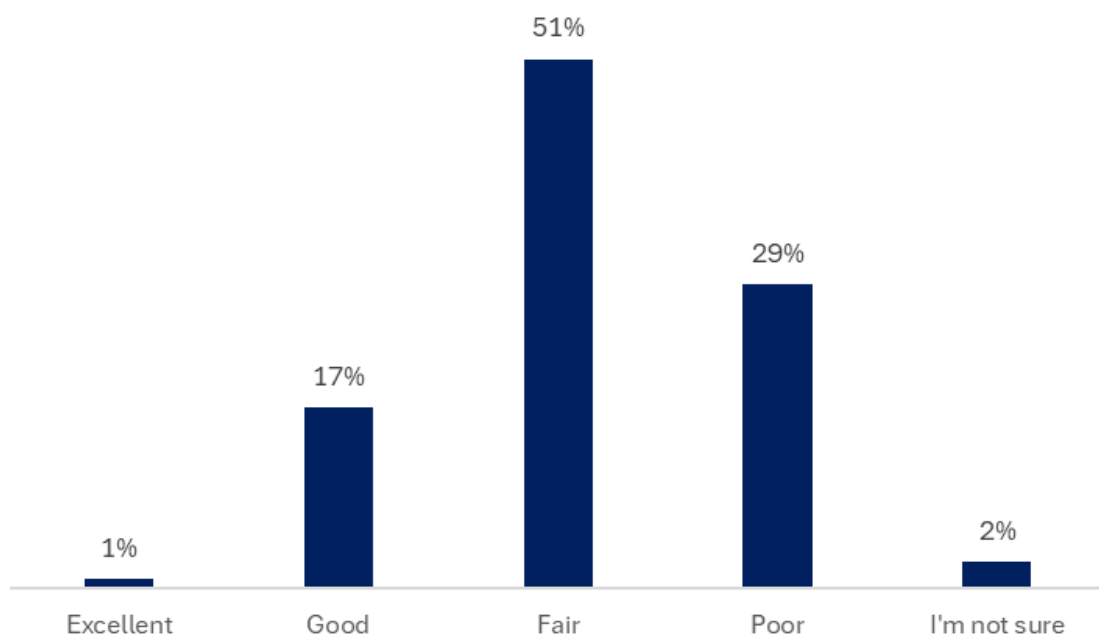


SOURCE: Q19. On a typical day, how do you normally commute to work?

Perceptions of the Local Economy

Respondents were asked to provide insights into how the public perceives the local economy in a series of questions. Most respondents indicated that they see the city’s current economic performance as “fair” (51%), with 29% viewing it as “poor”, 17% as “good”, and the remaining 3% as excellent (1%) or unsure (2%).

Sarnia’s Current Economy (respondents’ rating)

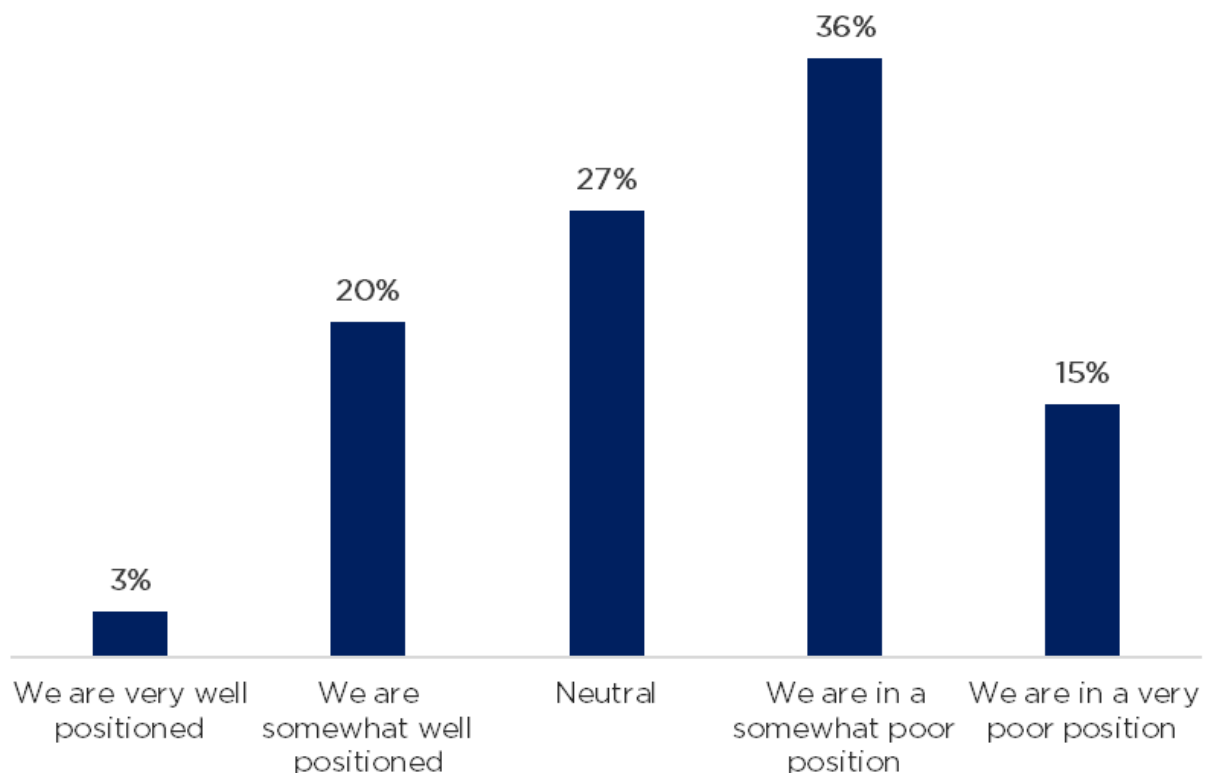


SOURCE: Q7. How would you rate the current condition of Sarnia’s economy? (Select One)

Economic Outlook/Confidence

Compared to the current state, respondents were generally more pessimistic about the future of the local economy. 36% felt that the city was in a somewhat poor position over the next 10 years, and 15% went further and felt the outlook was very poor. 27% of respondents identified with a neutral economic outlook, 20% felt that the city is somewhat well positioned for the future, and 3% felt that Sarnia is very well positioned for the next 10 years.

Sarnia’s Economic Outlook for Next 10 Years (respondent’s evaluation)



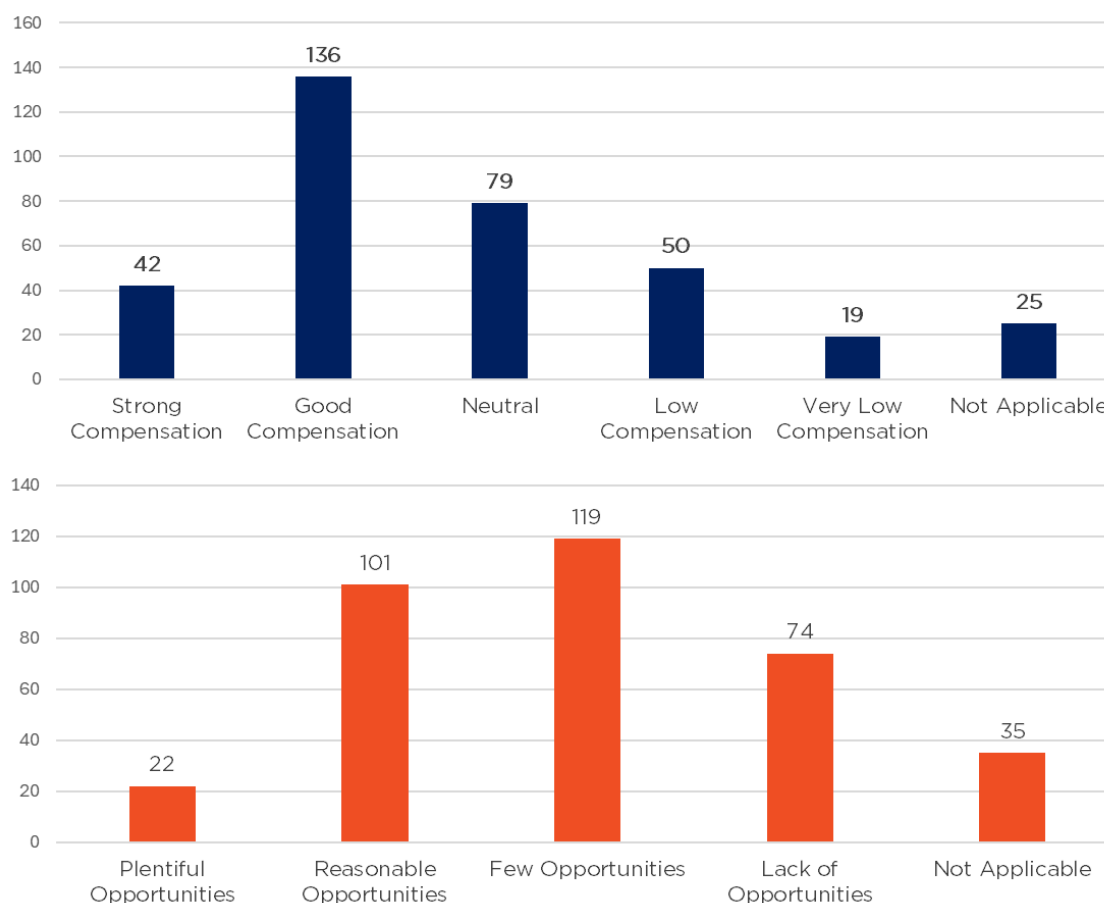
SOURCE: Q8. Do you think that the community is well positioned for future economic growth and prosperity over the next 10 years? (Select One)(

Local Pay-scale & Employment Prospects

The majority of respondents felt that compensation in their field for their level of experience was good or strong, with many also identifying as neutral and some identifying their current level of compensation as low or very low. Additionally, some respondents who are not currently employed could not provide applicable answers.

In addition, respondents were asked for their perceptions of the number of opportunities available in their field and for their level of experience. These respondents indicated public perception of a relatively tight labour market, with the majority of respondents indicating that there are few or a lack of opportunities.

Compensation (Pay-scale) and Employment Prospects (Opportunities) in Sarnia (respondent’s evaluation)

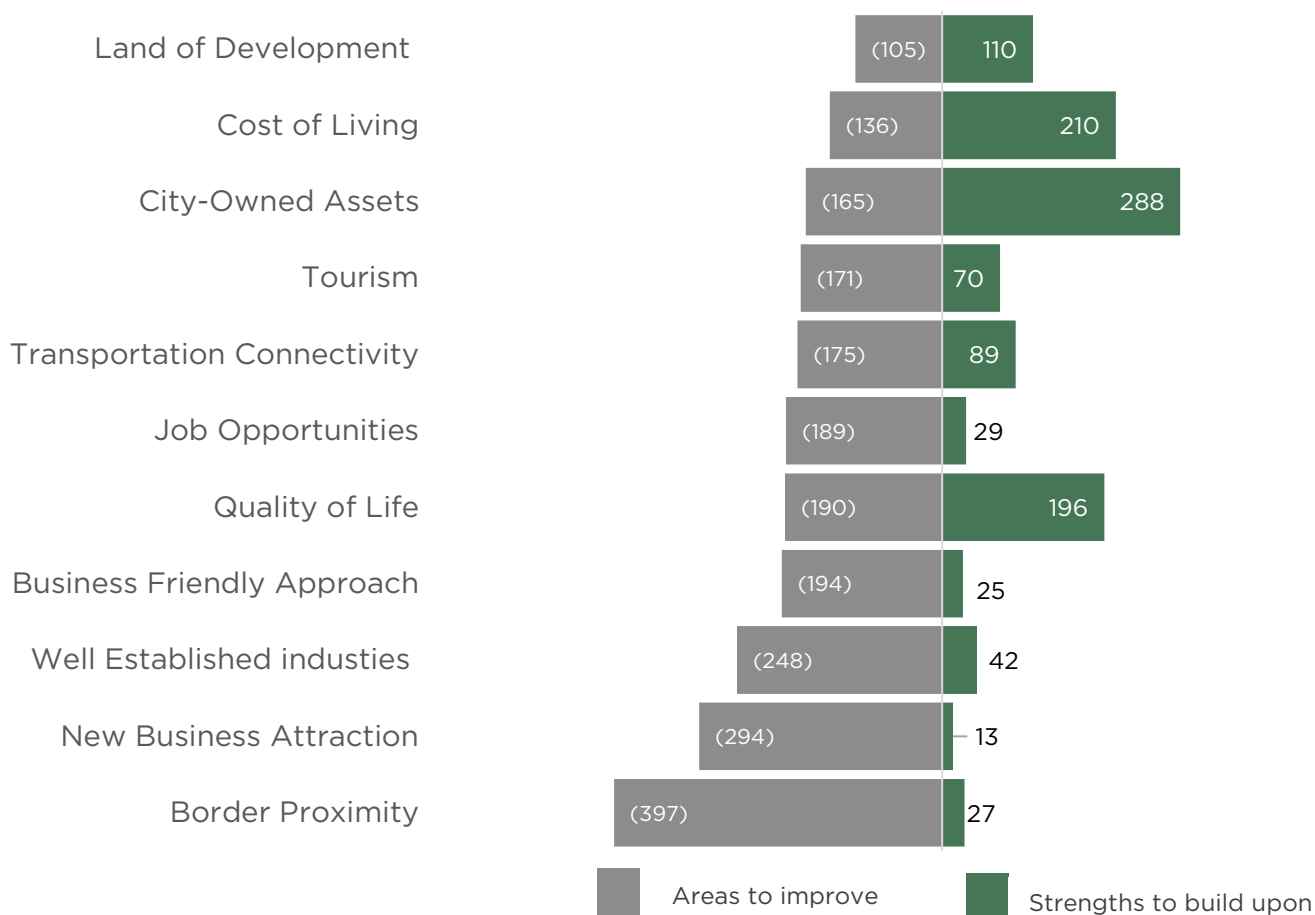


SOURCE: Q17 (lower) - How would you characterize the job opportunities in your field or for your level of qualification/experience in Sarnia? & Q18 (upper) - In your opinion, do you feel that your field is well compensated for your level of qualification/experience in Sarnia relative to the rest of Southwestern Ontario?

Challenges & Opportunities

Throughout the survey, respondents were asked to select from a list of categories/assets and identify the city’s current socio-economic strengths and potential areas of improvement. The most selected strengths included border proximity, well-established industries, city-owned assets, relatively low cost of living, and a high quality of life. The most selected areas of improvement included improving new business attractions, creating a more business-friendly approach, investing in quality-of-life improvements, facilitating more job opportunities, improving transportation connectivity, growing the tourist economy, and investing in city-owned assets.

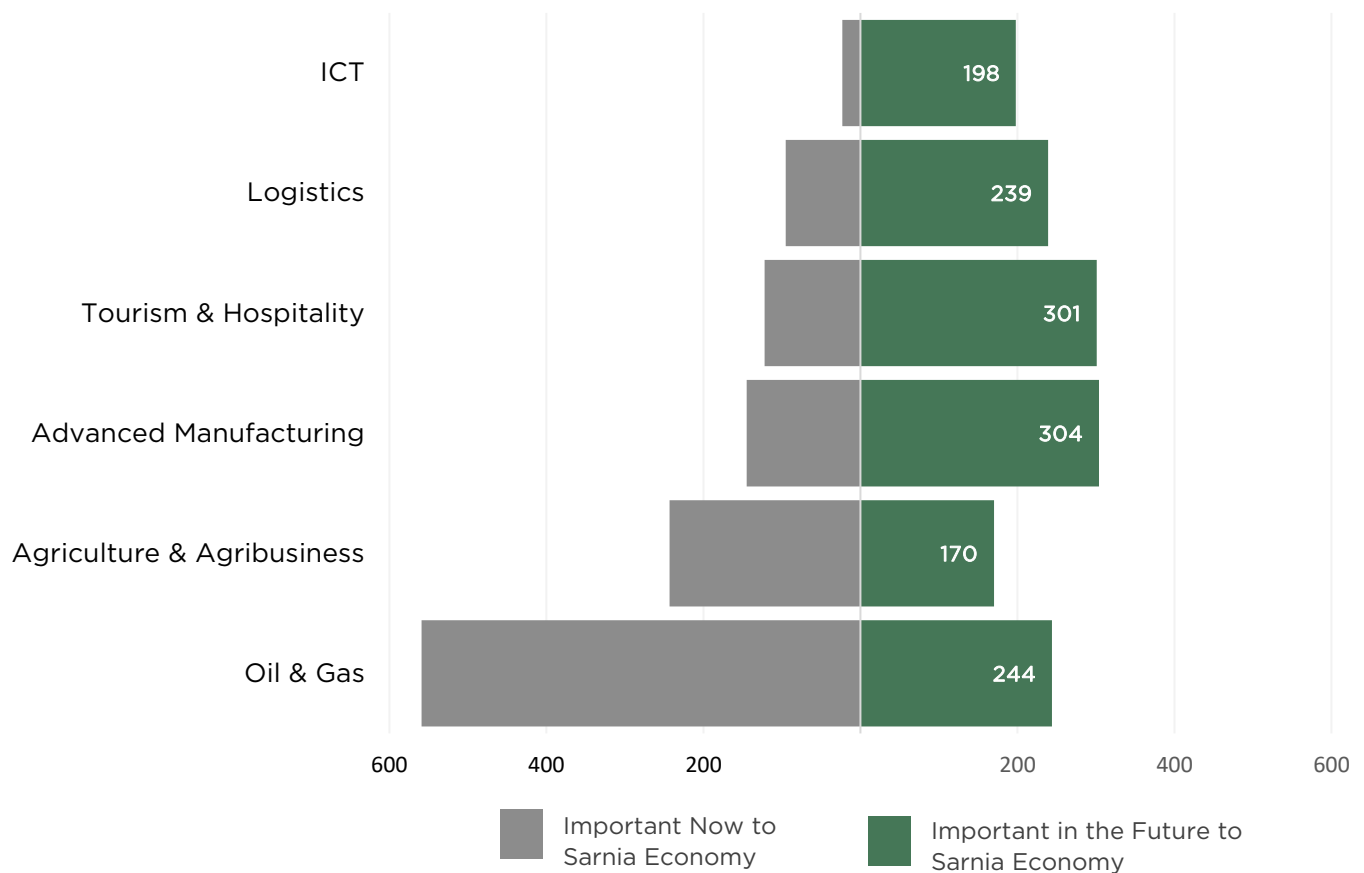
Sarnia’s Community Strengths and Areas of Improvement



SOURCE: Q9. What do you think are the top three strengths that make Sarnia a great place to live and do business? (Choose your top three) & Q11. What are the top three areas that can be improved to make Sarnia a better place to live and do business? (Choose your top three).

In a similar vein, respondents were also asked to identify which industries they currently most identify with Sarnia, and separately, which of the same industries are best positioned for future growth and continued prominence in the local economy. The industry responses most associated with Sarnia currently were Oil & Gas, with Agriculture & Agribusiness, Advanced Manufacturing, and Tourism & Hospitality also being well-recognized.

Industries That Represent Sarnia Now and Opportunities for Growth in the future (as reported by respondents).



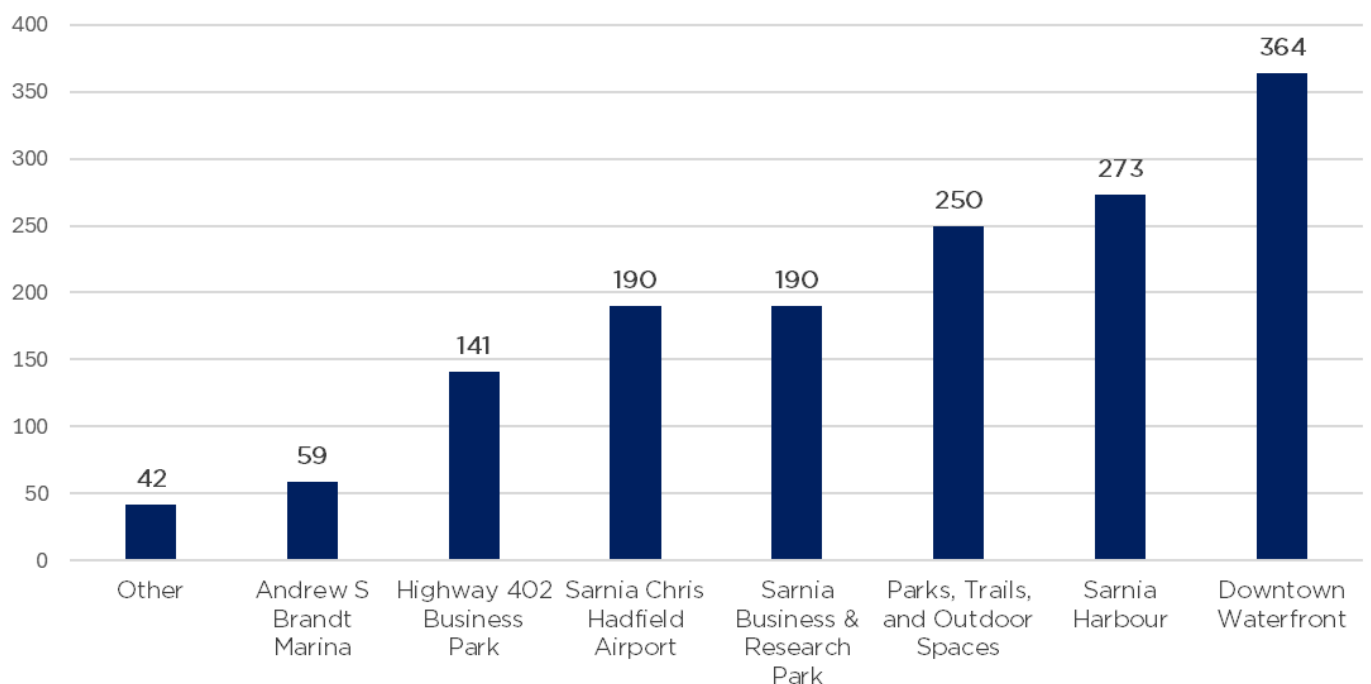
SOURCE: Q10. What industries come to mind when you think of Sarnia? (Select all that apply) & Q13 What industries do you think have the best opportunity to prosper in Sarnia in the future? (Please select your top three choices)

The industries that represented the most significant future opportunities for Sarnia were Advanced Manufacturing, Tourism & Hospitality, Oil & Gas, and Logistics. Other sectors, such as Information, Communications and Technology (ICT), were not identified as being associated with Sarnia currently or having significant growth potential.

Leveraging City-owned Assets

Respondents were asked to prioritize, by ranking from first to third, a selection of City-owned socio-economic assets based on which they thought were most likely to drive future economic prosperity. The most important asset, as identified by respondents, was the downtown waterfront. Sarnia Harbour and the local network of Parks, Trails, & Outdoor Spaces were identified as the second and third priority assets. The Sarnia Research & Business Park and Chris Hadfield Airport were also cited as important assets for the future, with the 402 Business Park and Andrew S Brandt Marina identified as relatively less important.

Prioritized City-Owned Economic Assets (according to respondents)



SOURCE: In your opinion, which are the most important City-owned assets that will drive future economic prosperity? (please select your top three choices or none of the above)

Vision for Sarnia

Survey respondents were asked to provide three key themes or *visions* for Sarnia in the future, with each response limited to a word, phrase, or short sentence. These responses encapsulated the diversity of perspectives on the city’s present and future and were synthesized into three overarching themes or areas.

Growth and Economic Diversification

Many responses emphasize the need for growth, whether through attracting new businesses, expanding industries, or diversifying beyond the current reliance on oil and petrochemicals.

Participants envision a future in which Sarnia becomes a hub for varied industries, including green energy, tourism, and technology. Economic revitalization is seen as critical for job creation and retaining a younger, more dynamic population.

Safety & Quality of Life

Safety, cleanliness, and efforts to improve public perceptions of homelessness and crime are frequently mentioned. Respondents connect these improvements to a better quality of life and the city’s overall attractiveness for families and businesses. Many respondents also highlighted the need for infrastructure enhancements, reinvestment in community amenities (community centres, arenas, pools), more affordable housing options and more accessible public spaces. These elements were interpreted as foundational to fostering a thriving community.

Waterfront & Tourism Development

The city’s waterfront is viewed as a signature asset for Sarnia’s identity and future. Suggestions include better utilization of waterfront areas for tourism, recreation, events/programs (concerts, festivals) and community engagement, alongside improved branding to position Sarnia as a desirable destination. Developing the waterfront is generally linked to enhancing the city’s vibrancy and economic opportunities. Respondents would like to see improvements to the waterfront, including clear and decisive actions leading toward the fulfilment of the Waterfront Master Plan.

Waterfront and tourism related themes reflect a collective desire for a balanced approach to economic, social, and environmental renewal. Each theme also connects to actionable strategies that could inform the economic development master plan for Sarnia.

Big Ideas

In addition to phrases or words that encapsulate a future vision for Sarnia, respondents were provided with the opportunity to elaborate on a big idea that could help accelerate Sarnia’s development as a community and local economy. After reviewing the sentences and paragraphs provided by respondents, we organized the big ideas into three key themes: waterfront development, business attraction and economic growth, and downtown revitalization.

Waterfront Development

Feedback focuses on the need to develop and better utilize Sarnia’s waterfront. Suggestions include creating tourism attractions, enhancing recreational spaces, and using the waterfront as a centrepiece for community and economic development.

Respondents widely see Sarnia’s waterfront as its key asset for the future. Respondents recognize that it is an unrealized asset with significant work and investment required. Suggestions for the waterfront include expanding public spaces, enhancing recreational areas, creating family-friendly attractions, and using the waterfront for tourism and local and regional festivals and events.

Ideas range from improving walkability and cycling infrastructure to building cultural landmarks or tourist-focused developments like cruise ship docks or waterfront dining experiences.

- Some respondents express concern about balancing development with environmental preservation. There’s fear that overdevelopment could harm the natural beauty and ecological health of the waterfront.
- A few suggested that previous waterfront plans have lacked ambition and follow-through. Some expressed concern about the feasibility (or long-term benefits) of advancing “new” initiatives based on inaction and the lack of political commitment on earlier plans.
- A minority felt that resources could be better allocated elsewhere, arguing the waterfront is already developed enough compared to other parts of the city.

Business Attraction & Economic Growth

Responses frequently highlight the importance of attracting new businesses and supporting existing ones. Programs and incentives which reduce barriers to business set-up, and which fostering a business-friendly environment are emphasized as ways to spur economic growth.

There’s a strong consensus that attracting businesses is vital for Sarnia’s growth. Proposed strategies include tax incentives, streamlining regulatory processes, and targeted promotion of Sarnia as a destination for green energy, manufacturing, or technology industries.

Respondents often connect business attraction with job creation and reversing population decline, emphasizing the need to focus on industries that appeal to younger workers and entrepreneurs.

- Some criticized the overreliance on oil and petrochemical industries, suggesting a shift to renewable energy and diversification is overdue.
- Others warned against offering excessive tax breaks or incentives, which they believe could undercut the city’s revenue without guaranteeing long-term benefits.
- A few respondents expressed frustration that past efforts to attract new businesses have not yielded significant results, arguing that systemic changes (e.g., better infrastructure and reduced crime) are prerequisites for success.

Downtown Revitalization

Many respondents advocate for revitalizing the downtown area to make it a vibrant hub for commerce, tourism, and community life. This includes improving infrastructure, enhancing public spaces, and addressing issues like vacancy and underutilization.

Many respondents view downtown as a critical area for renewal. Recommendations include improving aesthetics, filling vacant storefronts, and creating mixed-use developments that integrate housing, retail, and public spaces.

Enhancing downtown nightlife, bringing in local shops and restaurants, and hosting cultural or community events are frequently mentioned as ways to draw both residents and visitors to the area.

- Homelessness encampments, crime, and drug use are often cited as barriers to downtown revitalization. Some respondents believe these issues must be addressed before any meaningful progress can be made.
- There was concern about affordability—both for businesses renting spaces and for residents. Some worry that efforts to attract investment and growth could manifest as gentrification and could push out local businesses and residents.
- A few respondents expressed skepticism about the focus on downtown, arguing that efforts should prioritize broader infrastructure upgrades or suburban areas.

SWOT Analysis: Summary

Strengths

- Large heavy industrial operations that provide significant economic spin-offs to the city
- A skilled workforce able to undertake larger, sophisticated industrial projects
- Sarnia has multiple City-owned assets (Waterfront, Airport, Harbour, Business Parks, etc.) that can support economic growth
- Sarnia’s proximity to the United States and situation along Highway 402
- Lambton College and the Western Sarnia-Lambton Research Park’s research and innovation capabilities
- Natural assets (lakefront, beaches, river, etc.)
- Cost of living versus other locations in Southwestern Ontario
- The City’s Economic Development Department Staff and other supporting organizations that make up the Sarnia-Lambton economic development ecosystem

Weaknesses

- The City’s reputation for not being open for business and red tape
- Sluggish population growth versus the rest of Southwestern Ontario
- Limited transportation options connecting Sarnia to neighbouring centres including London, Windsor, KWC and the GTA
- A perception that Sarnia is geographically isolated, being located at the western periphery of Ontario
- Lack of available industrial real estate (built space) and shovel-ready sites
- State of municipal infrastructure
- Lack of family friendly amenities to attract and retain families

Opportunities

- Waterfront development to attract tourism and support community development
- Developing an open for business reputation at City Hall
- Initiatives to attract and retain youth in the city
- Develop better transportation connectivity both in and out of Sarnia as well as within the city
- Further collaboration and coordination among Sarnia and Lambton County’s economic development ecosystem partners including First Nations communities

Threats

- Minimal announced upcoming capital investment projects in Sarnia’s petrochemical and chemical facilities
- Uncertainty with the Line 5 pipeline project which supplies many industrial users in Sarnia
- Canada-US Relations: Trade, Border, etc.
- Lack of alignment between government policies (Provincial and Federal) with Sarnia’s heavy industrial base
- Aging workforce
- The perception of Chemical Valley being Sarnia’s defining image