

COVER STORY

“They are Chinese and they bring their friends”

by Chris Cooke



Allan Calvert

An unsteady economy induced by the COVID-19 pandemic is creating winners and losers. That's the opinion of Sarnia Lambton Chamber of Commerce president Allan Calvert.

In an extensive First Monday interview Calvert says restaurants, travel and tourism will have a tough go of it in what he describes as a potentially “dark” winter.

“Patio season is over and the road ahead for some marginal businesses will be difficult as the border remains closed,” he says.

But there are bright spots.

Calvert views the opening of CIMC Vanguard, a refrigerated semi-trailer manufacturer in the former UBE Automotive plant at Airport Road as one of them. The company, which entered North America at Monon, Indiana as Vanguard National Trailer Corporation in 2003 is spending millions and plans to hire 90 people.

According to Calvert the location next to the Chris Hadfield Airport just 15 minutes from the border is strategic. “Vanguard is Chinese,” he notes adding, “they are Chinese and they bring their friends”.

The company's web site describes Vanguard as a subsidiary of CIMC Vehicle Group, “the world's leading manufacturer of commercial transport dry and refrigerated container and trailer equipment with subsidiaries across the globe”.

Which brings Calvert to comment on City discussions about the future of the financially struggling Airport.

Scottsdale Aviation, which is contracted to operate the airport at \$1 per year through until 2027 has fallen on hard times since commercial airline service ended earlier this year. The company is seeking \$40,000.00 a month in municipal subsidies.

Calvert rejects a recent economic development report suggesting the City divest itself of the airport as “not a good move” adding that it would be “unwise”.

He cites Hamilton as an example of a City that created an economic jewel by attracting courier service FedEx and now Amazon warehouses to its airport.

Calvert ponders the future here describing it as “a no brainer” noting Sarnia doesn't have cold storage or refrigerated warehouses, but will soon have a Chinese company that manufactures refrigerated trailers.

“Remember,” he says, “Vanguard is Chinese and they bring their friends”.

He suggests the City's new economic development commissioner may want to knock on doors.

Mayor Mike Bradley agrees saying the economic development commissioner will report directly to Chief Administrative Officer Chris Carter. “The message we want to leave is if you knock on our door we will help you”.

Bradley is opposed to divesting, saying the airport should be the first task of the economic development commissioner.

At a recent Council meeting Margaret Bird emphasized the need to keep the airport running noting, “it is used for private jets that help with organ transplant deliveries, among other services”.

Council has asked for audited financial statements from Scottsdale before making a decision on the airport, expected in December.

Asked about the future of the Chemical Valley following significant losses by Suncor and others, Calvert expressed concern.

Suncor reported a third quarter loss of \$302 million and has indicated 15 per cent of its workforce could lose their jobs over the next year and a half.

Calvert says hydrocarbons will continue to be a main factor in the economy for decades to come and government support is needed.

“There has to be a higher level of conversation that includes the green agenda coming out of Ottawa. I'm not an authority on electric vehicles but it seems to me there isn't much discussion about battery disposal”.

Calvert notes, “it is a topic that seems to be swept under the rug”.

On the topic of the pandemic Calvert expects the border to remain closed well into next year and mask wearing and social distancing will be the norm for the foreseeable future.

