

# Municipal World

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## The Economic Shift

*Repainting the canvas of  
local economies – from  
industry to culture*

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*The City of Welland demonstrates the growing role  
of the creative community in shaping an evolving  
economy – as well as capturing a proud history*



# The Economic Shift

*How Welland is repainting the canvas of its local economy*



by Bernice Booth



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Canadian cities and towns are either adopting (or are in need of adopting) a new economic development canvas. Some municipalities are starting with a clean slate and creating a new economic scenery. Others have remnants of unforgotten stories that either need to be painted over, or somehow worked into a new narrative. This is the City of Welland, Ontario's evolving economic story, told through the cultural lens of a creative community.

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On this month's cover is Welland's statue commemorating the history of Leon's – a local company that has developed into one of the largest retailers in Canada. Located in Chippawa Park, the statue is said to bring prosperity, good health, and many loving children to those who stop for a photo.

## The Rise and Fall of Industry

Welland's history was predominantly expressed through photography and literature. During the early part of the 20th century, the artist was drawn to technology and the advancement of photography. Canada was growing with production, and advancement was embraced by all social classes. Early 1900s photographs are evidence of a booming industrial Welland at that time. Photographers captured a Welland expanding in both industry and multiculturalism. The city was destined to thrive with import and export; nestled between two great lakes and with easy access to rails and water, Welland secured its place on the industrial map.

Families immigrated to the area hoping to build an industrial legacy for the city. The city also welcomed a diverse fabric of men and women to

join in the exploding workforce. Chinese, Dutch, Hungarian, Irish, and Francophone communities flocked to the growing local steel and textile industries. The dual-income family brought a purchasing power to early Welland, driving the downtown core to emerge as part of the economic scenery

The growth of the city flowed from a broad multicultural thread of tradition, with communities working to strengthen their heritage and cultural identities. In 1957, the Auberge Richelieu Community Center was built to nurture Francophone culture, a move that ultimately grew the city into the heaviest French-speaking population of all Niagara. The city still continues to install bilingual signage to accommodate residents who speak and read French.<sup>1</sup>

During the 1950s, the manufacturing industry gained political support. Many of the downtown streets were changed to one-way, in order to accommodate heavy traffic flow from shift changes. Although downtown merchants were outraged at the time

and concerned that it would harm business, the decline of the industrial sector in years to come was far more detrimental to consumerism. As the industrial revolution slowed down to a screeching halt toward the 1980s, Welland's spending narrative also halted.

In the wake of the industrial decline, most of the city's manufacturing workforce was left waiting for the sector to rebuild. For decades, women, men, and eventually their children had taken their places in industry, using their hands to make a living and build a future for their families. Manufacturing was more than a means of livelihood for residents; it was a legacy. Although the municipality established an economic

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<sup>1</sup> Ethnic History, Local History and Genealogy, Welland Public Library <<http://localhistory.welland.library.on.ca/industry/Ethnic%20History/Ethnic%20History%20of%20Welland.htm>>.



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## As the local economy continued to decline, so did the livelihood of the downtown core. It was obvious that rebuilding the economy was not going to happen merely from rebuilding the manufacturing industry.

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development commission in the early 1960s, the decline of the Canadian dollar and lack of export for natural resources left a different legacy in the city: abandoned industrial lands, along with a significant unemployment rate and a low tax base.

As the local economy continued to decline, so did the livelihood of the downtown core. It was obvious that rebuilding the economy was not going to happen merely from rebuilding the manufacturing industry. A different approach was required to recreate and move the city forward. So, the municipality began to look for funding to revive the economy and integrate artistic value back into its story. The city ultimately secured \$250,000 of provincial funding in 1987 to revitalize the downtown core.

### The Development of a Creative Community

The municipality decided to invest in local artists to paint murals to reflect on the city's celebrated local history. The outdoor Mural Art Project was initiated not only to revitalize the downtown core, but to rejuvenate civic pride and to help connect the community to the past. Some of Niagara's finest artists took to the streets to craft 28 giant murals throughout the city. Some of the murals stretched 80 feet long, while others stood three storeys high. They attracted people from all over Ontario to take a guided tour through the streets to catch glances of the city's proud history.

Celebrating history and the murals eventually began to fall by the wayside as the industrial community continued to wither into the 1990s. Local

communities lost the value of their past because of an uncertain future. As the city continued to face even more economic hardship, civic pride and community engagement began to crumble, as did the murals.

The municipality continually introduced incentives to attract investors and developers while letting go of a history that was no longer an option for sustainable future. The approach shifted, to focus on revitalization and cultural initiatives. The city was becoming more creative and ready for change. Sport tourism was a growing trend among other communities and the city was well positioned to build on a sport tourism podium.

Left with an abandoned canal and ambiguous future, the city partnered with TO2015, investing over \$10 million to build the state-of-the-art Welland International Flatwater Centre (WIFC), along with an announcement to conjointly host the Toronto 2015 Pan American Games.

The WIFC, now in its third year, hosts numerous sporting events. Most notable are the multicultural Canadian and World Dragon Boat Races that continue every year, bringing thousands of athletes to the city. Also attracting local tourists to the area is the city's outdoor amphitheatre, which was positioned off the canal and near the downtown core. The theatre was built to ignite the downtown core with music and showcase local artists throughout the summer months with free live performances. The municipality, along with its residential and commercial communities, has begun to cherish the arts and the vibrancy of social connection that a creative community resonates.

### The Power of Imaginative Thinking

Imaginative thinking and commitment compelled Welland to adapt to a shrinking economy. Through a learning process, the city has also discovered that there is a wealth of artistic growth and progress within Niagara – adopting a culture plan and advisory committee to nurture arts and ensure the continued investment of time and dedication in making culture a priority.

The provincial government has also recently completed a comprehensive culture strategy for Ontario. People within the arts and culture community want to see investment in education, more collaboration between the culture sector and with other sectors, and sustained, reliable funding. In Ontario alone, the culture sector adds almost \$22 billion to the economy, supporting more than 280,000 jobs and including more than 58,000 artists – nearly twice as many as any other province in Canada.<sup>2</sup>

When the Niagara Region was awarded the Culture Capital of Canada in 2012 and was awarded significant funding from the federal government, local municipalities began to show more interest in the arts. Suddenly, community theatre groups began to emerge, and the definition of arts was redesigned to broaden and appeal to all communities.

Although Welland (and Niagara as a whole) has endured a difficult economic history, the pursuit of a strategy

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2 Culture Talks: a summary of what we heard from Ontarians <[www.ontario.ca/page/culture-talks-summary-what-we-heard-ontarians#section-5](http://www.ontario.ca/page/culture-talks-summary-what-we-heard-ontarians#section-5)>.

that invests in and protects the arts is beginning to paint a far more attractive future for everyone. Within the region, across Niagara's 12 local municipalities, the total economic impact of the cultural sector is estimated at \$396.3 million in labour income for the economy, \$595.2 million in total Gross Regional Product (GRP), and 13,088 jobs for residents.<sup>3</sup>

## A Shift in Perspective

Although the city's history remains the same, how the artists view that history has changed considerably since the mural project. Hosting the TO2015 Pan Am games inspired the Canoe Art Project, which brought artists together once again to capture Welland's history with murals

painted on the underbellies of canoes. The canoes have been placed on display across the city to celebrate and continue telling the city's story. The project displays paintings representing the waterway and sport history that the community has learned to appreciate and embrace.

Another recent artistic venture enabled permanent lighting of the East Main Street Canal Bridge – also known as Bridge 13. Now dressed with new paint and LED lights, the bridge displays an array of chosen festive colours to commemorate events and holidays. Bridge 13 has always been a cherished landmark and now stands as a muse and promise to the community. It has also become of interest to local photographers and is often showcased on social media. As artists photograph and examine the bridge through a cultural lens, they sometimes question if

Bridge 13, with all of its history and beauty, has now become a piece of art. That further prompts the question of what art looks like and, by extension, what a successful economy looks like. Regardless of the answer to those questions, Welland is now imagining a future with both art and the economy working together. Art or not, that is definitely a practice of a creative and promising community.

Regardless of current and future stories, every city has a few essential tools to create a better, more prosperous future. If an artist is given three colours, no matter how vibrant or drab those colours are, the challenge is to build a brilliant and compelling landscape. While Welland's canvas has been filled with art and cultural initiatives, it is not the only path. Every community should be looking for the tools, and the artists, to create its own vibrant economic picture. *MW*

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<sup>3</sup> Economic Impact Assessment of the Cultural Sector in Niagara <[www.niagararegion.ca/government/initiatives/culture-plan/pdf/economic-impact-assessment-background.pdf](http://www.niagararegion.ca/government/initiatives/culture-plan/pdf/economic-impact-assessment-background.pdf)>.

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