



Embracing its core value of inclusivity, Thames Centre honours National Day for Truth and Reconciliation. *Photo courtesy of David Barrick*

# Empowering municipal excellence

Thames Centre's journey of employee engagement

The Municipality of Thames Centre (15,000 pop.) hugs the eastern boundary of the City of London, the fastest growing city in Ontario, and abuts the Greater London International Airport, one of only four federal airports in the province. Thames Centre has four interchanges along Canada's busiest highway and the world's busiest truck route (Highway 401), carrying 60 per cent of vehicular trade between Canada and the United States.

The biggest auto investment in Canadian history is happening within the same federal-provincial riding. About a 15-minute drive from Thames Centre, the new Volkswagen battery cell gigafactory is breaking ground this year. The \$20 billion in investments are expected to create 3,000 direct jobs and up to 30,000 indirect jobs.

The region is growing and positioning Thames Centre to be future-ready while respecting its agricultural heritage, and the local property tax base. As a municipality, understanding the challenge of how to do more with existing resources first requires a look inward.

The municipality's plan process began in June 2023, involving extensive documentation review, a service inventory, online surveys, interviews, open houses, employee feedback, and multiple public council workshops and meetings.

For Thames Centre, the purpose of the strategic plan was to provide a navigational path in planning for the future of the local government. The strategic plan establishes priorities that enable municipal council and staff to co-ordinate budgets, policies, and services on a go-forward basis.

This plan comprises 36 recommendations and five strategic pillars, including:

- **1. Sustainability** – Ensure the municipality maintains fiscal prudence, along with affordable and sustainable taxation levels.
- **2. Smart planning** – A commitment to informed decisions for community growth while maintaining a cherished “hometown feel.”
- **3. Community communications and engagement** – Heightened communication channels between the municipality, council, and residents, fostering transparency in decision

making around budgets, planning, and infrastructure.

- **4. Active living** – Expansion and improvement of recreational services, accessibility, and programs, particularly aligning service growth with community needs, remains a key goal.
- **5. Economic development** – Efforts focused on retaining and attracting businesses to enrich local amenities. Supporting existing businesses while attracting new ventures is a strategic priority.

To achieve the 36 recommendations and deliverables in this now agreed upon plan, above and beyond the day-to-day operations and within resource constraints, a transformative journey is unfolding within the Thames Centre, propelled by a renewed dedication to employee engagement.

### Culture of Collaboration and Empowerment

Since the summer of 2023, the municipality has made significant strides in nurturing a workplace culture that fosters collaboration and empowers employees to elevate customer service standards for residents.

Recognizing the pivotal role of a motivated workforce, initiatives have been implemented to bolster staff morale and cultivate a sense of ownership in service delivery. Through the promotion of trust and support, employees are encouraged to embrace continuous improvement and innovative approaches to meet the evolving needs of the growing community.

This cultural evolution is underscored by three core goals: enhancing customer service, fostering employee engagement, and achieving council's strategic plan milestones. These interconnected objectives serve as guiding principles, propelling Thames Centre toward its overarching vision.

At the heart of this transformation lies a set of core values carefully selected and defined by employees and endorsed by council:

- **Compassion** – Being supportive, patient, understanding, empathetic, and respectful through all interactions.

- **Integrity** – Being honest, ethical, responsible, and accountable.
- **Continuous improvement** – Pursuing excellence through embracing a goal-oriented mindset, professionalism, and innovation.
- **Inclusivity** – Working together to enhance community well-being through a dedicated effort to support every person.
- **Communication** – Effective two-way communication, teamwork, transparency, and trust.

These core values are now embedded in the foundation of a renewed employee performance review process, demonstrating how core values are being met and ensuring alignment with organizational principles.

Furthermore, to equip supervisors with essential leadership skills, the municipality implemented a comprehensive corporate learning series addressing topics aligned with organizational core values such as:

- continuous improvement and lean for leaders training
- Indigenous cultural competency training
- guest speakers addressing issues such as inclusivity, self-awareness, and effective communication

This investment in professional development enhances organizational efficiency, allowing Thames Centre to optimize existing resources more effectively.

Central to the municipality's transformation is the formalization of senior management team meetings, providing a platform for open dialogue and transparent communication among department directors. Weekly meetings facilitate candid discussions, enabling leaders to address concerns and navigate challenges collaboratively. One step further is the formalization of an extended management team where all people leaders have a forum for open discussions, mutual support, and co-operation.

Moreover, a “one team” approach and internal branding fosters cohesion across departments, emphasizing teamwork and care in pursuit of common goals. Through investments in training and education, employees are empowered



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with the tools and knowledge needed to navigate municipal governance while upholding community values.

## Aligning Operations with Resident Needs

This transformative journey has revitalized labour relations and culminated in a renewed collective agreement with union partners, symbolizing a shared commitment to service excellence and taxpayer stewardship. By nurturing a culture of engagement and inclusivity, Thames Centre is poised to deliver enhanced services that resonate with the diverse needs of its residents, exemplifying municipal excellence.

Aligned with its commitment to employee engagement and service excellence, the municipality has embarked on a comprehensive approach to align its operations with the evolving needs of its residents. As referenced, this includes:

- conducting a thorough municipal service inventory
- developing a renewed strategic plan and term of council priorities
- implementing key performance indicators to ensure accountability

The launch of "OpenBook," a transparency initiative, has further enhanced communication and trust between the municipality and its residents, as well as a newly adopted "customer service charter," translating into improved service delivery and responsiveness to community needs.

In addition to fostering a culture of continuous improvement, Thames Centre recognizes the importance of acknowledging and celebrating the accomplishments of its dedicated employees along the way. The municipality has instituted initiatives such as the creation of an annual highlights document, showcasing notable achievements and milestones reached throughout the year.

The tangible impact of fostering employee engagement is undeniable. In less than a year, every department, empowered and motivated, has delivered concrete outcomes that position Thames Centre for the future. These include the:

- revamped and transparent budgeting process
- successful implementation of new time and attendance software
- completion of the community services and facilities master plan
- adoption of an updated official plan
- enactment of the first parkland dedication bylaw
- formulation of a community improvement plan
- completion of a comprehensive community risk assessment and fire master plan
- modernization of policies and bylaws
- establishment of formalized project management processes and principles for all capital projects

As further recognition, the municipality has introduced the CAO Award, honouring individuals who have demonstrated exceptional commitment, innovation, and leadership. Through these initiatives, the municipality inspires pride and motivation among its workforce, reinforcing the culture of engagement and service excellence.

As the region undergoes unprecedented development, Thames Centre has embarked on a transformative journey, placing employee engagement at the heart of its pursuit of municipal excellence.

In a short period, Thames Centre has gained clarity of purpose guided by the strategic plan and term of council priorities. The municipality has understood that employees are people too and demonstrated a willingness to sit down and hear what employees have to say, leading to organizational core values developed and defined by staff.

The municipality provided training and education opportunities to empower employees and instil a freedom to innovate, then recognized and celebrated successes along the way – all within existing resource constraints. It is through this inward reflection and engagement that Thames Centre is now ready to be an active and prepared participant in

meeting the opportunities that broader regional growth is bringing.



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