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**North Bay & District Chamber of Commerce**

**Submission – February 1, 2010**

**Re: Proposed Growth Plan for Northern Ontario**

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The North Bay & District Chamber of Commerce has reviewed the Proposed Growth Plan for Northern Ontario in paper format, at the Public Consultation held in North Bay on December 2, 2009 and more recently at a Business Leaders Forum on January 28, 2010. The Business Leaders Forum last week, hosted by the Chamber, was attended by 65 business leaders and regional politicians. Following input from the Board of Directors and, more importantly, the attendees of the forum, we are pleased to provide the following comments on the Proposed Growth Plan for Northern Ontario.

1. An initial impression of the plan is that the intentions are good, but there is insufficient detail provided to establish a level of comfort to achieve the targeted objectives. A Growth Plan for Northern Ontario is essential for sustainable growth, being the largest geographic area of Ontario with an abundance of resources.
2. From past experience, we understand that mining and forestry are cyclical; these are two of Northern Ontario's largest areas for growth. We need to have a detailed plan on how to ensure minimal impact on economic stability when downturns occur. Ease of regulations and improved communication and partnerships from all levels of government and community can mitigate some of these impacts. Current provincial policies subject the North to policies that may make sense in Southern Ontario; however, does not reflect the reality in Northern Ontario. A good example is the Provincially Significant Wetlands policy which is extremely important for Southern Ontario; however, half of Northern Ontario is wetlands. The arbitrary decision to remove a specific land mass from the development sector without first undertaking a detailed geographical survey of the entire region to better determine what boundaries make the most sense in balancing the environmental/economic interests in Northern Ontario are misguided with this legislation.

3. There needs to be more on standardizing regulations. Any development that may occur, despite going through all the proper processes and due diligence, and despite getting approval from a few government departments, may have one ministry that has different regulations and thus the project is stopped or delayed. It does not make sense that, within the same government, departments and ministry offices, there can be so many differences in regulations that do not work together to ensure timely and appropriate approvals.
4. Energy costs in the north are substantial for our companies. Increases are not relative to usage, as we are seeing some industries have doubled and tripled their bills over the last year. The new programs that promote a new green generation or alternative energies make a great environmental statement, however those subsidies and costs are borne by the current users, making it incredibly difficult and adding substantial amounts to their energy costs. Unfortunately, not all businesses are able to utilize off-peak hours only.
5. While Northern Ontario has its challenges with population and the Federal Government's view of a potential decline is concerning. The Province's commitment to improving infrastructure is welcomed and paramount to the successes of Northern Ontario. The uniqueness of Northern Ontario certainly with the abundance of resources, the people, the ability for improved transportation (rail, road and air), the increase in education and partnerships with our Aboriginal Communities are taking shape. The Aboriginal population is the only area in current Northern Ontario communities that is seeing growth. The need for better integration of First Nation people in our socio-economic system is imperative. We see the statistics of native children under the care of Children's Aid, low registration in schools, deplorable housing, sanitary and healthcare conditions that exist on reserves. We believe these issues are more important to these communities at this time, yet there is no solid plan to ensure they can be integrated into society.
6. The only other area recognized as important for Northern Ontario population increases in the future is immigration. This was not evident in the plan, yet Northern Ontario is already implementing strategies for attracting immigrants for employment and settlement services in the north.
7. Further regard to improved transportation, with respect to Ontario Northland Transportation Commission, is essential. Due to the large size of Northern Ontario and the distances between major centres, ONTC provides vital freight and passenger services in the North. Such an important infrastructure needs have a detailed plan in the report and has great potential for expansion. We are aware that CP is considering abandoning the rail line between North Bay and Smith Falls and further to Ottawa; this could be a potential loss for the northern rail corridor which is essential to northern Ontario industries to remain competitive in exporting goods. ONTC is not even referenced in the Growth Plan and there is little awareness of the potential loss of rail link service and the potential impact to businesses in Northern Ontario.

8. As you are aware there are numerous mining companies entering into agreements with Native bands to ensure that environment and economic interests are met; however, there are many basic requirements (as stated above) that need to be addressed in Aboriginal communities, that may impede the government's hopes for success of tackling the more complex issues of land claims and preparing to develop Community Land Use Plans for Native bands.
9. Northern Ontario has excellent post secondary education opportunities, and the plan needs to address the current funding formula for Northern Ontario post secondary institutions. We have quality education opportunities, yet equitable pay for the same jobs is not evident and, as such, we have difficulty keeping qualified individuals in the north. Immigration and integration can also assist in these areas.
10. Technology is extremely important to many sectors, and the larger centers are well prepared with technology and infrastructure developments. Due to our vast geographic area, the rural areas are somewhat challenged with the ability to utilize technology, and, as such, these areas with vast resources are challenged with this hurdle, that if overcome, could contribute to more added value in the resource sectors.
11. Health Care has seen some great strides with the addition of the Northern Ontario Medical Schools in Sudbury and Thunder Bay. The addition of nurse practitioners has also assisted with the shortage of doctors. However, the implementation of the LHIN to allow for a more coordinated effort for healthcare in Northern Ontario has not provided the results required. More money is being spent on administration rather than the intended use for the communities. In November 2009, it was very disappointing that North Bay was not successful in obtaining a nurse practitioner clinic; as many of the health care teams locally have moved to current patients only, from what were once open clinics. Health Care teams in the past were provided funding to allow patients to be seen by a number of doctors if their own was not available, as well as having their medical records available digitally to all the doctors in the group. Years have passed and not all in the group have achieved registering their patient records online and have now become elite groups that will not see other patients and/or if their current patients do not sign an agreement, they can no longer be a patient of that doctor or the group. We are well aware of the numbers of people who do not have a family doctor, and now cannot even attend the clinics in town; as such, we can only expect that the already overtaxed emergency rooms at the hospitals will become even more overtaxed (noting that ER is much more costly to our health care, than the clinics and family practices). These health care issues need to be resolved prior to the plan of action – as the current realities go against the suggested plan of action.
12. Also regarding health care, long term care and social services, municipalities are finding it difficult to service these areas as the boundaries are all different. A prime example is a long term care facility that is approximately 20 minutes away from North Bay and is funded by 10 rural municipalities. Three of those municipalities are in the Nipissing region while the other seven are in the Parry Sound region; the

funding allocations are different for each region. For affordable housing opportunities, the Parry Sound region municipalities do not qualify for the northern portion of affordable housing funding.

13. Forestry has seen a major shift from pulp and paper, and businesses are prepared to diversify and change from the traditional industry it once was. The government is taking steps to reform the policies for tenure, pricing and access to allow this sector to become more sustainable, innovative and competitive. The concern is that the forestry industry has been in a downturn for some time and requires a quick resolution, through reforming policies and providing the education for those entering this sector. This can be done quickly, if the government will allow it, and we would suggest this be a short-term in implementation. This is certainly an area for innovation, added-value, sustainability and investment.
14. Tourism is also very important to Northern Ontario due to the vast amount of outdoor recreation opportunities and the increase in education to visitors to ensure healthy active living. The concern is that the government has stated they are reexamining the tourism regions and are potentially going to restructure the tourism associations across the province, however many of these current associations are in limbo awaiting the restructuring and as such are clearly hurting financially in their roles for tourism promotion of the regions. While the new branding of Ontario Tourism and the marketing continues, the regions outside the GTA and Golden Horseshoe are at a disadvantage to attract tourists, especially Northern Ontario. Also, the Province is looking at the opportunity to implement a province wide type destination marketing fund; however, the numbers that are stated that would be returned to the regions to use as marketing dollars are not sufficient. While the tourism restructuring is taking a large amount of time to be determined, the financial commitment is only short term. There needs to be a long-term plan in place for financial assistance to the regions, as well as an immediate decision on the restructuring of the regions to allow for planning and financial stability, if in fact the current association regions (or the new ones) are to move forward on projects for 2010. As we are all aware, 2009 was a difficult year for many sectors, and tourism was no different; however we cannot sit back and not plan, as we come out of the recession.
15. Municipalities and small rural communities that rely on small tourism operators are seeing a large shift in ownership of these small operations and there is the assumption that these new owners are not willing to put improvements into these tourist camps; however they are looking more at the property values on the lake and options to redefine the areas as residential. This issue goes against the communities' official plans for development as well as provincial policies in these areas.
16. With the lack of senior bureaucrats living in Northern Ontario to truly understand the realities of regulations made in the south, that do not meet the requirements for the north is a concern. A couple options to ensure better understanding and communications would be to relocate senior bureaucrats to the north to ensure policies for growth are true solutions for the north, or more Familiarization Tours for senior bureaucrats on a regular basis would also be of benefit.

17. Nowhere in the plan is a municipality even regarded as an entity. If you want buy-in from the north, you have to ensure stakeholders are providing input to the details of the plan. As for transfer payments, municipalities have too many guidelines put upon them, and yet these are the leaders who know where the money is needed most to improve their communities. While one time funding is always a nice surprise for some communities, it certainly does not allow for future planning.
18. In general, economic development regions do make sense in some cases; however, the concern from most is that it is perceived as forced amalgamations, which is not something many areas who currently work together on economic development would be in favour of.

Overall the concept of a plan is good news for Northern Ontario; something that Northern Ontario has been asking for, for many years. The implementation and success will be in the details and we believe the stakeholders in Northern Ontario need to see the details before the plan is approved at Queen's Park. We hope that all levels of government will see the importance of working together, especially with conflicting regulations, to ensure that Northern Ontario utilizes its resources, communities and innovation for appropriate growth in economics, social and environmentally sound ways.