

McMaster Community Breakout Group – Sept. 19, 2011

This breakout group was led by John Wigle, with Dr. Patrick Deane, McMaster University president, as the speaker. Gord Arbeau, director of public and community relations, was also on hand to answer questions, and Mary Williams, McMaster's new vice-president of university advancement listened in for the first session.

Dr. Deane said the downtown health campus will be an asset to the city, a "beachhead" for other university operations and expanded programming. It will anchor the expansion of the university to downtown. Perhaps students will be living as well as studying downtown. The strength of the university is its people, not buildings; it has 26,000 students plus the faculty and staff. His special interest is in experiential learning, "community service learning." They expect the new building will have 54,000 patient visits a year, which will help relieve the situation of 15,000 Hamiltonians without a doctor.

Dr. Deane said that he is very mindful of the issues of concern to us and is familiar with them from his experience at Queens. The growth in McMaster's enrolment is driven by the provincial government's desire to increase spaces by 60,000 students over the next five years. Seventy per cent of jobs require a post-secondary education, so the province wants to increase the proportion of the population who achieve this. Some universities have been opening satellite campuses, but the government has now outlawed them. This means that no new satellite institution can open in Hamilton. So it's a challenge to accommodate all these students. Enrolment had been expected to plateau after the double cohort passed through when Grade 13 was eliminated, but it has continued to climb. The rate of participation is increasing partly due to new Canadian families.

Question and answer sessions (consolidated):

McMaster's ambition is not to grow. This year more students chose McMaster as their first choice and their level of acceptance of McMaster's offer to admit them was therefore higher. The university's goal was to admit 5,200 students, but 5,600 came in. The final count will be in November. Enrolment management is an art, not a science.

Dr. Deane says he admires the students' level of engagement with the community. Experiential and co-op education is his focus, both for degree work and volunteer work.

An audience member asked about access to the libraries for research—she can't use Mills Library. Dr. Deane said he would give her his contact information to see what can be arranged. Mr. Arbeau said there are ways for community members to access the libraries, but it's something they should work on as the library transitions [to a heavily digitized format].

The province funds growth in two streams. One is the BIU, basic income unit, i.e., funding per capita; everything hinges on the number of students the government wants to see. If the number of students exceeds the fixed amount the province has budgeted, it

reduces the BIU. The money is set for two years. The second stream is capital funding, but the government has very little money for infrastructure. Last spring it announced \$45-million for a new building for the social sciences and humanities; McMaster fared very well. The location of this new Wilson building has not yet been decided. If we keep the same government in the upcoming election, the university also expects to get money for repair of existing buildings. The government does not build residences, however. Dr. Deane said one possibility is public/private partnerships to build residences on or off campus, since they generate revenue. He said he is “entirely sympathetic” to the question about residences for students.

Mr. Freeman, who lives at the corner of Sterling and Dalewood, said they moved there in 1977, and it was dreadful last Saturday (Sept. 17). He phoned the police, who came immediately and dispersed the students. He also mentioned a bus that goes between the Westdale campus and the business school; Mr. Arbeau said it was a smaller shuttle but now is a bus.

Ken Moyle said that he supports getting buses off Sterling, as it’s better for pedestrians and cyclists and asked whether there has been a change to traffic patterns within campus. Mr. Arbeau said the Sterling entrance into campus is complicated and no changes are planned. The university supports light-rail transit. It would like a transit hub consolidating the HSR, GO buses, and LRT where the GO buses are now [on the west side of campus]. The GO terminal on campus handles about 3,000 people a day. Truck traffic must exit onto Main Street and must travel through campus, although there are “odd exceptions,” but Rob Payne lets him know about errant trucks.

A woman who lives on Gary Avenue said that houses are still being converted to student rentals. One recently had a dangerous campfire in the yard and the fire department came and scared the living daylights [not her exact word] out of the students.

Michael Ladouceur observed that the university is good for the community and is transforming the city from steel to clean technology and research. The point of friction is managing growth. The police came very quickly when he called about a noisy party next door, and the next day he got a very nice note of apology from the students. Students need a place to “recreate,” a “salubrious outlet.” Matthew Dillon-Leitch, MSU president, pointed out there is a bar on campus, and mentioned the Student Community Support Network. Mr. Arbeau pointed out that extra police are paid by McMaster on Friday and Saturday nights and sometimes on Thursdays.

Student housing: Price is a challenge at the West Village Studios on Main St. West. This is the first year they’ve been full. It’s cheaper to live in student houses. LRT would be good for high-density development. Fifty per cent of first-year students live on campus (they must have a 79-point grade average); 80 per cent of on-campus residence spaces are reserved for first years.

Rob Payne asked what the community should be doing about the high numbers of students. Dr. Deane answered that community-based learning develops a civic

consciousness, not a message of how the university transcends the community. The campus has porous boundaries, unlike the campus he knew in South Africa, but still has its back to the city. At Queens both some students and some community members felt disrespected by the other. The math is stacked against the community. [Because of the demand for student housing off campus] housing stock is too expensive for incoming young faculty. McMaster is caught up in the provincial system and has to play. Rob asked how we ensure that public schools will still be in the community a decade from now.

The minister of St. George's Reformed Episcopal Church on Emerson commented on the remarkable change in the behaviour of students who live near the church—no graffiti, no garbage. He got an immediate response to a call to McMaster about one problem.

Mr. Deane said the crown wards' program will be in the new humanities/social sciences building on campus. At a community session he attended downtown, people said parking at the university is difficult and events are poorly advertised. Mary Koziol, past MSU president and now working as a special assistant to Dr. Deane on community affairs, said she is working to make visitors welcome with a free lecture series, talks for children, a spring walking and biking event.

Dr. Deane concluded by thanking outgoing AWWCA president John Wigle for his two years co-chairing PACCR (the President's Advisory Committee on Community Relations). The university and the surrounding community have stresses, but he thinks together they have made progress. He is about to release a letter to the campus community about his priorities for the next five years. Number 1 is community engagement; learning doesn't all have to take place on campus.

Carolyn Kinsley
AWWCA Director