

**General Membership Meeting
November 25, 2008**

President's Message

"To begin, I'd like to do as I always do as I start my speech, and that is to thank each and every one of you for coming today ~ showing your support for not just the Chamber but for Fort Frances and district. As we planned today's meeting, Dawn went over the agenda with the executive and looked at me and said ... you ok with doing the President's message? Of course I said yes and have been mulling over exactly what I would say today for over a week. I considered giving the same speech I gave last year but knew that Bill Gushulak would likely be here and would remember, so that just wouldn't work.

It finally came to me while I was curling. You can do a lot of thinking while you're sweeping the rocks into the house. I thought of Cheese. More along the lines of 'Who Moved My Cheese' by Dr Spencer Johnson. I had read the book a few years back and got to read it again this spring along with my colleagues at the office. I'm sure there are others here who have read this fun little book. The book is about change in our work and day to day lives. The foreword tells us that it's a simple story with four characters (two are mice and two are little people) who live in a Maze and look for cheese to provide both nourishment and happiness. Our friends in the maze ~ Sniff and Scurry & Hem and Haw ~ face change and need to deal with that change. One is successful, having seen the proverbial writing on the walls. The others, not as much. If you haven't read this book, take an hour or so out of your life, and give it a read. I'd like to think the Chamber is like that successful mouse ...reading the writing on the wall, anticipating change and adapting.

We started out the year with new and old faces. We experimented with immediate change – we went from two meetings a month down to one, and reduced the number of working committees by almost half. We set goals and priorities. As a Board, we determined which programs, projects and events would have the most relevance to our members. Not only did we need to be relevant but fiscally responsible as well, with a careful eye on our budget.

The Business Retention and Expansion Project, started in 2007, went into full swing with newly hired Community Development Officer Cassandra Parise, volunteer Irene Laing, and a dedicated working committee. After many, many meetings, the report was publicly launched this past October, outlining actions and strategies intended to reduce barriers and encourage both new and existing business to flourish. Along with community partners, the Town of Fort Frances, the Rainy River Future Development Corporation, Confederation College, and others, the Fort Frances Chamber of Commerce will make every effort to ensure the plan is carried out.

With BR& E well under way, the Board set out to map our Strategic Plan. Strategic planning was something I had wanted to see happen in 2007. How tough could it be, I thought. Well, it was tough. It didn't happen in 2007. It did happen in 2008 though. We met in March with the help of Geoff Gillon as facilitator. Like the BR&E project, and many meetings later, and fine tuning by Dawn Booth our Chamber Manager, the Strategic Plan was passed by the board to be presented to you today.

Working on the BR&E and Strategic Plan made many of us very aware of our relationships with our community partners and others as we dealt with change ~ with looking for that elusive cheese in the maze.

We continued to work with the Town of Fort Frances, presenting to the Town when needed, especially providing input on the budget process. The Chamber continued to work with various committees including EDAC, the Diversity Committee, and the BIA. Representatives from the Chamber attended both teleconference and regional NOACC (Northwestern Ontario Associated Chambers of Commerce) meetings. Looking forward, we now have someone from our Chamber sitting on the executive of NOACC ... a local voice at the regional level, advocating to the provincial and federal governments.

In terms of events and projects ~ it's been a busy year for our Manager and volunteers. Our events and projects serve a dual purpose. Depending on the event or project, will serve the business community and community at large in one-way or another. These same events and projects also provide the much needed revenue in order that we may be able to function as a Chamber. The Home and Leisure Show this spring was a big success thanks to the volunteers who organized and worked the event, the businesses and groups who participated and the public who attended. Quest for the Best held in July was another event, partnered with the Bass Championship folks. For the audience and those on stage, the event was a great success. Budget wise, not nearly the success we would have liked ~ the event may see some interesting changes next year. Remember...it's about reading the writing on the wall and adapting to change. Because of the shortfall, we had to look to other events that would both benefit the community and the Chamber. For those who missed it the first time round, we brought back the Discover our History tapestry for sale at Canadian Tire and other venues. In September, we partnered with the RRFDC and assisted with the Harvest Dinner celebrating the Agricultural community and its role in the Rainy River District. In October, we hosted a very successful Great Canadian Chili Cook Off ~ thanks going to participating teams, volunteers and of course everyone who came out to enjoy good company and hot chili! Earlier this month, we hosted the 13th Annual Business Awards, sponsored by Bell, recognizing and I quote "businesses, organizations and individuals for outstanding business achievement and the contributions made to the economic growth and prosperity of the Rainy River District". We had great fun that night with fresh faces and entertainment, with a full house. A successful night all around.

Other events included the Business After Hours in May on the deck at the Rendez-Vous and a Customer Service Workshop in October held at Confederation College, both of which were cosponsored by the RRFDC. Projects ~ in August consumers were surveyed and results tabulated providing valuable information to the Chamber.

So back to the Cheese – I'd like to think that the Chamber has been, and going forward, continues to read 'the writing' on the wall. Our world, and our little piece of it here in the Rainy River District, is continually changing. We can see the change coming and work with it and adapt to that change, like AbitibiBowater with its hog boiler, like Lowey's and its state of the art eco-friendly green house, like Cousineau's and Gillons' merging forces ~ or we can sit like 'hem and haw' and wonder 'who moved my cheese'? As President, now becoming past president, I'm confident that our new President and Board, will continue to look forward and work hard for our membership, to keep Fort Frances the great community that it is to work, live and play in.

In closing, thank you to the Board in allowing me the opportunity to serve as President of the Chamber. And to Dawn Booth ... thank you for all that you do for the Chamber! And remember, 'Move with the Cheese!'"

Christine Denby
President 2007 & 2008