

Web site opens doors to big business

Tax cuts induce major industry to locate work, jobs in Hamilton

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Tour Hamilton by air.

That's what developers, investors and companies will be doing this year.

Not only can they check out properties by driving into a business park, they can virtually fly above the park if they want.

They'll be able to click on a piece of land, check out the nearest buildings, maybe the tax information that comes with the land, and just how close it is to nearby roads or rails.

They'll be able to find out about utility rates and learn some demographic information about the city and its residents. They can also access a directory of city businesses.

And they can be sitting in an office in Tucson, Arizona, if they want to do all this, via the city's Web site.

It's Hamilton's new GIS — or geographic information system — the latest tool to market the city as a place to do business and to invest in.

"I haven't seen anything like it in Canada," says Neil Everson, head of economic development.

The innovative program springs from base-mapping work done years ago under a local roads-driven — not an economic — project, as the region of Hamilton-Wentworth was planning its future.

The GIS is one of the reasons Everson is high on 2003. He has big hopes for new investment here and for other developments, such as new sewer, water and other services that will open up business land.

"I think we're going to have a good year," he said.

"We have a lot coming in. ... one million square feet (93,000 square metres) I know of — right off the top of my head — in new investment, primarily in manufacturing."

That's good because over the years Hamilton has lost a lot of its big industrial assessment.

The city has an economic develop-

ment strategy to seek new industry. The plan focuses on six key sectors: industry and manufacturing; agriculture; the airport area; health and biotechnology; information and communications technology; and the film industry.

When industry goes, so does the tax revenue supplied by these companies.

And that's one reason why city budgets are strapped, why homeowners are being asked to pay relatively high property taxes.

The tax weight formerly occupied by industry four decades ago — maybe 60 per cent industrial-business assessment versus 40 per cent residential — has been reversed.

So, the city has trying to reduce the business component of city property taxes. It's called the BTR, or business tax reduction program.

"The BTR program has gone a long

way to create interest (in Hamilton) and so is the fact that none of our neighbours (including Halton and Mississauga) have any property for business."

Everson is also relying on the fact that other cities are running out of ready business land too. In some cases, landowners want to put in houses because it offers a quicker turnaround to have a housing subdivision, instead of a business park.

Gridlock on highways within the Greater Toronto Area, including Burlington, is also making companies and investors look toward Hamilton.

Gridlock, he said, is "a huge issue." It is a key motivation for people who are looking for new places to invest their business-development money, he says.

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