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Summit to form GTA recession action plan

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CITY HALL BUREAU CHIEF

Civic and business leader meeting in Markham today are trying to come up a strategy to help the GTA cope with the effects of a global recession.

The day-long Greater Toronto Region Economic Summit, which is the first of its kind and is co-chaired by Mississauga Mayor Hazel McCallion and Torstar Corp. chair John Honderich. It is designed to bring together 250 leaders from business, academia, labour, social services and politics to brainstorm and create solutions for the region to succeed.



TONY BOCK/TORONTO STAR
Torstar Corp. chair John Honderich chats with delegate Joseph Halstead at the Greater Toronto Region Economic Summit, at Seneca College in Markham.

The delegates are now in breakout sessions focusing on four key areas – maximizing the financial services sector, restructuring the manufacturing base, investing in people and promoting research, innovation and creativity.

At an introductory session, Nik Nanos of Nanos Research briefed delegates on a poll his firm conducted of Ontarians and the economy.

While respondents believed that government can help cushion the downturn, the clear message was they did not want to see taxes raised.

"They say, 'Don't turn to us to foot the bill,'" said Nanos. "People want to see stimulus but they don't want to pay for it."

The other main message from those polled was to focus on jobs – and how to create and keep those jobs – as Ontario continues to shed jobs, notably in the manufacturing industry. Nanos warned that it may take longer for Ontario than other provinces to recover as a result.

While delegates include municipal leaders from across the 905 and 416 areas like Toronto Mayor David Miller, Vaughan Mayor Linda Jackson and Brampton Mayor Susan Fennell, the focus goes beyond just the Greater Toronto Area to include other geographic areas.

That means when the auto sector is considered, it goes beyond GM in Oshawa, Ford in

Oakville, Chrysler in Brampton, but also Toyota in Woodstock and Cambridge, Honda in Alliston and the many auto parts manufacturers in the GTA and beyond, says a summit discussion paper.

Participants were asked to submit their thoughts in advance to a series of questions, and some themes have already emerged including how to ensure faster accreditation and cross-training programs, matching skills to jobs and integrating new immigrants.

Other ideas include abandoning any investment in manufacturing by acknowledging Ontario cannot compete with cheaper costs overseas, spending on public transit to ease traffic congestion, making it the legacy of massive infrastructure investment, and offering tax breaks to corporations that are hiring.

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