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BUSINESS

One-third of surveyed Hamilton businesses say Trump tariffs will force job cuts

A tariff impact survey of 214 local businesses cites worries about layoffs, lost customers and spiking operating costs as the deadline looms for a new round of threatened duties on Canadian products imported to the U.S.

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Ethan Pollock cuts lumber for a customer in the warehouse at Turkstra Lumber's Green Road location in Stoney Creek.

Cathie Coward The Hamilton Spectator

By Matthew Van Dongen Reporter

Nearly a third of Hamilton businesses recently surveyed by the city expect job cuts as a result of the growing tariff war.

The city's economic development department teamed up with area chambers of commerce to survey businesses in February about the anticipated impact of broad, oft-changing tariff threats from new U.S. President Donald Trump.

Since then, the U.S. has already imposed 25 per cent tariffs on Canadian steel and aluminum — prompting counter-tariffs — and announced impending new duties on imported automobiles.

The city's questionnaire was filled out by 214 Hamilton businesses — and preliminary results were released just ahead of an anticipated April 2 U.S. announcement of what could be multilayered new tariffs on a variety of Canadian products.

Spoiler alert: the vast majority of responding business owners are "extremely concerned" about how long-term tariffs and counter-tariffs will affect their operations, said Hamilton Chamber of Commerce head Greg Dunnett.

"They're worried," he said ahead of the release of preliminary survey numbers. "They're worried about reduced demand for products, increased operating costs, disruptions to supply chains … These are all concerns that are growing the longer this goes on."

Early results from the survey previewed late Monday specifically show 32 per cent of respondents said they anticipated a "need to reduce workforce" as a result of the tariff war, while 30 per cent said it would prompt a hiring freeze.

More than 60 per cent predicted a "significant" impact on their businesses. Those predicted impacts included lost demand for services (65 per cent) higher costs to run the business (60 per cent), delayed expansion plans (38 per cent) and even a need to relocate to the U.S. (14 per cent) — a key Trump argument in support of imposing tariffs.

Nearly 60 manufacturing businesses participated in the survey, with other well-represented industries including transportation (19) and construction (16).

Respondents also weighed in on what could help — with more than 60 per cent pointing to tax relief, 40 per cent calling for government financial assistance and 36 per cent suggesting investment in "trade infrastructure" — including cutting interprovincial trade barriers.

Some business owners have gone beyond filling out surveys.

The head of family-owned Turkstra Lumber has published tariff impact videos to YouTube for both his own employees and also City of Hamilton councillors.



The head of Turkstra Lumber has pledged to keep all existing workers on the job at least through the end of the year despite trade war challenges.

Cathie Coward The Hamilton Spectator

For his 300-or-so employees, Turkstra vowed on video to avoid layoffs at his 11 lumber yards for at least the rest of the year despite the impending tariff turmoil. "I'm offering to protect jobs for the rest of the year … But I'm going to bleed red," he predicted in an interview. "There is no possibility of not losing money when new home construction goes down 50 per cent year over year.

"Things are looking bleak for (the building) industry."

Turkstra expects to feel secondary, rather than direct tariff pain, since he sources the vast majority of the lumber he sells from within Canada.

But his customers — including homeowners, contractors and the larger construction industry — are all vulnerable to tit-for-tat tariffs. In a second video, he argued the building industry already faces challenges from high municipal fees and interests rates. Adding tariff costs could be "catastrophic," he said.

That's why he is appealing to the city to cut permit fees and taxes "if only for a time-limited period" to help spur more building projects and keep workers employed through what is looking like a trade war downturn, or even a recession.

The area's association for home builders recently pointed to a study that shows fees average $88,200 in Hamilton for new residential, low-rise units compared to a national average of closer to $82,600 — which in itself is an increase of $27,500 since 2022.

Hamilton saw just 30 housing starts in January, the lowest total in the last decade.



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