

Building a Future for the City: An Interview with Mayor of Ottawa, Jim Watson

[INTRODUCTION]

[0:00:05.6] Benjamin Felix: This is the Rational Reminder Podcast, a weekly reality check on sensible investing and financial decision making for Canadians. We are hosted by me, Benjamin Felix and Cameron Passmore. We had a bit of a non-investing related bonus or special episode today, which was pretty cool.

[0:00:25.8] Cameron Passmore: Yes, I was at a – actually, our whole team was at a breakfast, a Christmas breakfast and we're all sitting at the function before Christmas and we saw the mayor was there, Mayor of Ottawa, Jim Watson, one of the team members said hey, go get Jim Watson so I walked over and I have seen him around but I don't know him and invite him to come and say hi to everybody at our table.

“Where do you work?” I told him. He's like, “Long live your money,” which of course in Ottawa, for those who live in Ottawa know that's our tag line is I've been advertised in radio now for it's got to be five years I would guess.

[0:00:56.0] BF: Yeah, about that, obviously, associated with Mark Sutcliffe who has been on the podcast, it's him saying that on the radio.

[0:01:02.8] CP: It's his voice. When he came over, we did a nice group shot and he chit-chatted a bit and I asked him if he'd be willing to come on the podcast, he said sure, just reach out and set a time. Got a chance to meet with him yesterday and it's some interesting questions, not a long interview.

[0:01:17.4] BF: Even though it's short and it's not investing related, it is – there's some good – Jim has some good insight into how he manages his time and how he thinks about his job and obviously not that many people get to be the mayor of a city like Ottawa so it's need to hear how he thinks about the work that he does.

[0:01:32.2] CP: Yeah, we try to tie it in so if you live anywhere in the world, he does talk about Ottawa and how he views Ottawa and how it might be of an interest to you no matter where you live. I think it is interesting for anyone.

[0:01:42.5] BF: Yup, it is interesting for anyone. But I guess the only warning we have is that if you're looking for the usual type of stuff we talk about like factors and investing, this is not that.

[0:01:52.0] CP: This is not the one but –

[0:01:53.1] BF: Enjoy it anyway, I'm sure you will.

[INTERVIEW]

[0:02:02.0] CP: This week, we have a very special podcast, we're joined by the mayor of Ottawa, Jim Watson. Your worship, welcome to the Rational Reminder Podcast.

[0:02:10.5] JW: Glad to be on your show, thanks Cameron.

[0:02:12.9] CP: Roughly, half the listeners of this podcast are from Canada. Many here in Ottawa but roughly, a quarter from the US and a quarter are from outside North America. My first question to you, how do you describe Ottawa?

[0:02:24.7] JW: Well, we're very proud to be the capital of the best nation in the world without bragging too much, that was a study came out, I think by News of the World report that indicated that Ottawa or Canada had the number one quality of life in the entire world. We're

proud of our capital city, an open, progressive community that's proud of its green space, proud of its tech sector, well-educated and a compassionate city.

[0:02:50.7] CP: You mentioned the tech sector so Ottawa clearly has a very vibrant tech scene as well as a business scene, not just a government town. Can you talk about the impact that you see that great companies such as Shopify across the street here, which I'm sure you saw on The Globe this weekend, they became the most valuable tech company in Canada by market cap.

Can you talk about the impact that companies like that have on Ottawa?

[0:03:16.2] JW: It's a massive impact and I was very pleased to see that article as well, I tweeted it out, you know, I look across the street and I see a great success story that started in Toby's basement basically, a guy trying to sell snowboards and look what it's created.

What that does is it helps to keep in mind, people's mind, opinion leaders and others that Ottawa really has a massive tech sector, certainly the largest on a per capita basis. We're often overshadowed by Kitchener, Waterloo or Toronto. But in fact, we have substantially more companies in Ottawa, not on a per capita, just plain number of companies in Kitchener or Waterloo. I think we're often overshadowed and thought of by most people in Canada and perhaps around the world that we're a government town.

The economy is very much diversified, you know, we have hundreds of SME's in the high-tech sector. Most of them in and around the Canada area, Canada North business improvement area just put out a study a couple of months ago that shows the amount of jobs that are created in that area, the contributions of GDP. It is very significant and that's one of the reasons why we've completed the environmental assessment to bring LRT to Canada and Stittsville because we got to get more people able to live downtown.

They want that lifestyle but work somewhere else other than downtown. You know, Shopify has done a lot of great things in the community above and beyond of getting us on the map

again but also, hiring a lot of people and creating a buzz about Ottawa, which is good for our marketing efforts to get more people –

[0:04:46.5] CP: They are certainly great promoters, I mean, Toby and Harley are very vocal on Twitter about their love for all the capital has to offer.

[0:04:54.4] JW: Yeah, I think that's great when you have the owners and senior management of the company that are actually boasting about Ottawa, that's a good thing and they obviously have roots here now and they're investing in other exciting projects around the city as well in east Ontario.

[0:05:09.6] CP: In fact, the CEO of Shopify was on a podcast last fall with Ottawa's own Shane Perish. Very famous podcast called Farnham Street, a phenomenal podcast and Toby talked about the benefit of building a company and what he called a secondary talent area. What he meant by that is like, in the tech scene, I guess Ottawa would be considered secondary to San Jose.

Certainly, you're aware of all these cities and the business climate. How would you react to how Toby describes Ottawa to be such a great place to find talented, loyal workforce, I think he was saying is a different, say from San Jose and other cities?

[0:05:48.8] JW: Yeah, we do have a challenge, no question about that in terms of attracting talent because it's a worldwide phenomenon, people can pick up and move somewhere and work from wherever. That's one of the reasons why in the city budget that I'm proposing we spend an additional half million dollars for a talent attraction and retention strategy through Invest Ottawa, they've been very good partners with us.

Economic development agency, happen to be the co-chair. They need those funds because we have in any given time, roughly 3,000 jobs that are going unmatched with people. You know, we have a lot to boast about, we have the highest number of Ph.D's and scientist per capita in the country.

We have five great post-secondary institutions here in Ottawa. Lots of private colleges that are training people for technology and you know, I think it's our collective responsibility to do a better job of first attracting and then keeping that talent here in the city.

[0:06:46.4] CP: Good for you.

[0:06:47.7] JW: I think you know, our quality of life, you know, study after study, MoneySense Magazine for two years in a row listed Ottawa as the most desirable place to live, we have lots of green space, you can be downhill skiing in 20 minutes from the downtown core.

[0:07:01.2] CP: A couple of months ago, on our podcast, we welcomed our mutual friend, Mark Sutcliffe on and it was a fascinating conversation and he talked about how much he is doing, you know, volunteer work et catered to having an impact on the city.

Can you talk about how much impact you have in that kind of way, he said you know, if I was mayor, I could do more but I'm not but I do the most that I can? I mean, you're kind of a long term impact in your role.

Also, you have enormous day to day people after your time and attention I would assume just in your role. How do you make sure that your vision drives through day after day?

[0:07:38.4] JW: Well, I guess a couple of things. Great staff that help me, the workload is pretty demanding. I remind people, there used to be 10 mayors in Ottawa, because the PM [inaudible] and one of their own mayor. There's one now, not looking for sympathy but we have three deputy mayors, we have a good staff here and it's really about time management trying to make sure that you have enough time to spend on your priorities.

And my vision emanates from what I campaign on as my platform. You know I went to the people and people said, "What is your vision?" I said, "It is right here. It's in these 10 announcements that I made in the last election." My vision is to continue with building of LRT

and continuing to ensure that we live in an affordable city that we provide the necessary benefits to those less fortunate than we are.

And that we continue to ensure that economic development remains a pillar of any decision we make because for all of the programs that we want to fund whether it be social or arts or heritage projects, we need the money to do that and we need a good strong firm economic base to provide those jobs, in turn people provide the taxes to go back into services.

[0:08:47.0] CP: How is social media, because you are quite active on Twitter, how has social media changed the job of being a big city mayor?

[0:08:53.7] JW: Well you know, most politicians have a love-hate relationship with Twitter and other social media platform. I think on the one hand it is a good way to get the message out quickly and your opinion on whatever issue. The other flip side is people have an unrealistic expectation that something is going to get done within 10 seconds of them tweeting and then there is a negative element where people are rude and anonymous bullying and so one that can take place.

So you know I generally find it that on a scale of one to ten, ten being helpful probably about a six and a half, seven. You know I think it is one of these things where it would be really hard for a politician to say, "I am just going to quit because I don't like what is going on in social media." [inaudible] did that and I think he lasted a few weeks and they realized the fingers got twitchy and it was missing what was going on.

[0:09:44.6] CP: But your likability is so high and you are always so connected remarkably to what appears to be every corner of the city. I think for you, it must be a great tool to keep your finger almost going.

[0:09:55.8] JW: Yeah, you know what? I shouldn't try to put it in context. So I maybe get 90% positive comments 10% negative. I think there are a lot of people, I remember Kathleen Wynne was just constantly attacked over personal issues and everything else and that would grind an

individual down and I think look at it is a way of communicating and communication has to be a two-way street and people want to comment back to you. They're entitled to that but I just hope people keep it civil.

[0:10:26.9] CP: So, I know we're limited for time, so this is my last question. It's one that we ask all of our guest, so your legendary in my opinion for your work ethic and your love for this community. People might disagree with your politics perhaps but they can't disagree that you are frankly a nice guy.

I ran into you at the airport many times. I have come across you in the sidewalk in Toronto. I am sure you don't remember but you are always pleasant, you said hi and always seemed interested. Which I appreciate as a resident and tax payer here.

We know there is evidence that people who have a purpose are happier. You always appeared to have a purpose like you are on a mission. So, can you talk about your greater mission and how this makes you happy?

[0:11:06.6] JW: Well that is a tough question. You know I have always said that when you really love what you do as a job it doesn't really feel like a job. So, coming in on the morning and working all day and going to events in the evening, the minute I lose that enthusiasm and zeal and love for the job and people that I meet, it is probably time to pack it in and there's too many politicians that stay too long and the voters give them a well-deserved vacation.

I just am very, very blessed and honored to be mayor of our city and it is a double honor to be the capital of the country and you know what makes me happy is that decisions that we make at this level can make a difference significantly in the lives and wellbeing of our citizens. You know I have served provincially, which I enjoyed and worked in the federal public service but I find my heart is here at the municipal level because you can actually make a difference.

We don't just talk about housing and housing policy. We build houses. We don't talk about trying to help people who are on fixed incomes ride transit in a greater rate with a better fair,

we actually implement the EquiPass and the Equifare. So, there is a real ability to get things done. Sometimes there's an element of unrealistic wishing on the part of politicians or members of the public. We can't do everything for everyone all of the time.

You know your tax bill would be through the roof and I think we need that balance in political leaders that look at the need to get things done to help people with the other side of the ledger, which is the revenue coming in. It sounds a little bit heartless but you know, I don't want to push more people into poverty by bringing in attacks, bill of six or 7% that we say, we can't afford to live in our house anymore.

[0:12:52.4] CP: What is your greatest skill to pull this all off?

[0:12:55.1] JW: Well, I think what I tried to do was to work with members of councils so that we develop a good sense of tomorrow for instances, the city budget. Budgets are full of great expectations, great surprises and great disappointments. You know, they'll be expectations up here, delivered down here, some really good surprises that people are pleasantly pleased with and then some who will never be satisfied that want more and more.

I think if I had some advice to people who are in the lobbying business for more money here, more money there. They have to step back and put their thoughts or put themselves in my shoes. Everyone who comes forward wanting more money for the arts or social services or transit or street cleaning and so on, there's another person that wants funding for something else.

I think we have to, people have to look at this as a pan-city exercise. You know, it's not just your own special narrow interest even though it's very important to you and I respect that enthusiasm people have about fighting for more money on this project of that project. You know, we also have to ensure that we can afford to pay the bills every day and I think, some people scoff when I say, you know, "You don't run your household the way you're trying to run the city," you know? I only have so much money, I can go get my roof fixed or go in that trip to Las Vegas or Florida or wherever. You have to prioritize.

That's when I ask counselors and the public, please help us prioritize and as I think Paul Martin once said, when you have a hundred priorities, you have no priorities. You can't come in with a long laundry list of everything you want to do overnight because what you may be promising is completely at odds with what I just campaigned on.

I believe that when you go to the public and you ask for their support and they give it to you in overwhelming numbers, you got to stick to your platform and not simply say well, I can't get it through counsel. I think going back to your question, long winded on my part. You got to be able to communicate and over communicate and work with counselors, staff, members of the public, various interest groups and you know come up with policies and practical pragmatic ideas that are implementable and not just talked about.

[0:15:07.5] CP: What a great answer and this has been a great interview. I appreciate how you represent this city and all that you do day in, day out. This has been a great city to raise a family, to own a home and to build a business, which we've been doing now since the early 90s. We have 20 great people in our office that we've grown nicely, we've found phenomenal talent, we do great work for phenomenal people in this town.

Mr. Mayor, thank you for your time.

[0:15:32.2] JW: No, thank you very much, Cameron. I appreciate it.

[END]

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