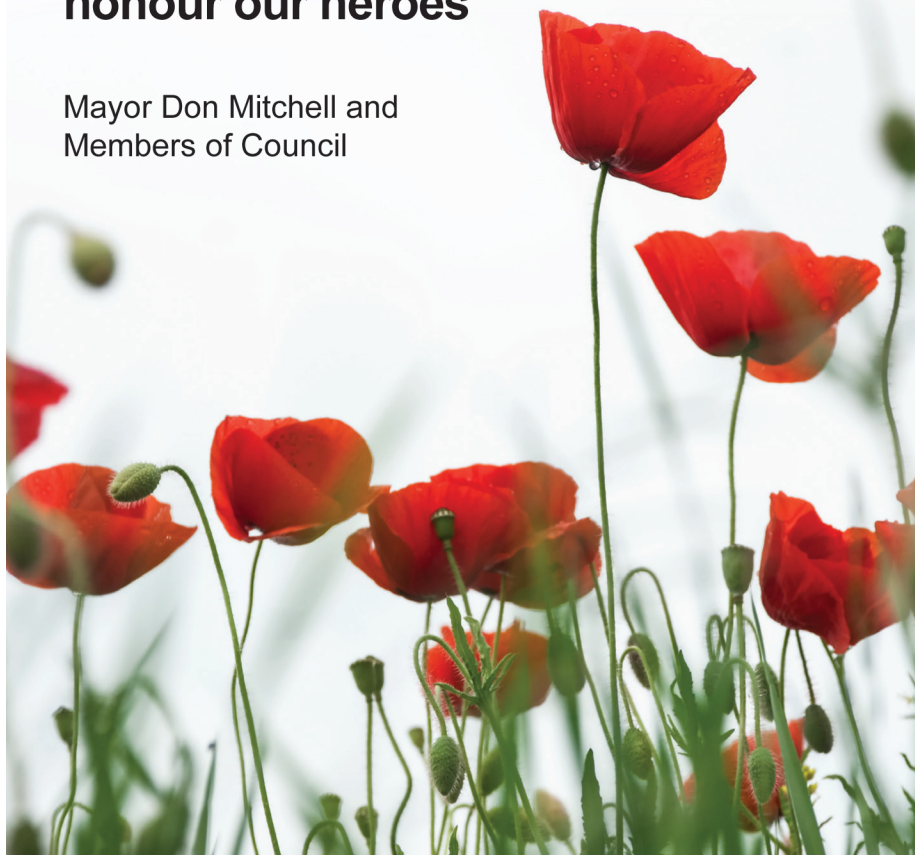


Lest We Forget

November 11

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Mayor Don Mitchell and
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Mitchell Lumber Closes After 65 Years

By Richard Bercuson



Mayor Don Mitchell's family-owned business on Church Street closed last Saturday, 65 years after his father and uncle opened it. Essentially, it came to this: as soon as Mitchell was elected mayor in 2014, it was a matter of when, not if, Mitchell Lumber would close.

In 1990, the mayor took it over after spending nine years doing court work in family and criminal law with a Guelph firm, a career he called "alright but a little office-y" and not always to his liking. But when it seemed the Brooklin business might shut down, he chose to step away from his law career to return and give it a try. That "try" lasted 26 years, through his entry into politics as a ward and regional councillor and now as mayor.

As Mitchell explained a few days prior to the closing, council positions were never designed to be full time. In fact, he says, people have been encouraged to be fully employed. Being mayor, however, was another matter. As a full time job plus, it just wasn't possible to run a business and the Town of Whitby.

"I was on council a long time," Mitchell says, "and it wasn't much of a juggle. As a regional councillor though, it became a little more challenging. As mayor, it's been impossible. I've just been doing some bookkeeping and government deductions and stuff. I don't have time to be here on a daily basis. It's put a big load on Chuck Treacy (a key employee). We were together for years and he's been trying to carry on by himself with other folks, but it's a big load. When I ran for mayor, I was 63 at the time and I knew it was going to come."

It became further apparent in August when he turned 65 and realized that trying to do both was next to impossible. "This business has been good to me. It's been a good life in a good community. After all it's been here my whole life. We even live in the house here where I grew up. But really, I don't like owning a small business I can't be at. For me, that's stressful. It's a lot of responsibility. My wife is relieved to see the schedule lightened. She was worried about the stress load."

When he stepped in to run the company in 1990, the era of big box stores had not yet begun. Within

a decade though, the landscape changed entirely. A small family-run business suddenly became much more challenging to operate. His entering politics compounded the problems.

The obvious question he's been asked is about other family members picking it up. "Would I have preferred if it had continued as a family business? Sure. But they weren't interested. Lots of people have that idea that the next generation becomes involved. My dad certainly did. He was happy when I came here and lots of businesses make that transition. But kids make that decision and if they're happy, then that's fine."

The day he decided it had to end was not so much difficult than relief. Aside from the inconvenience of being in politics and owning the company came the worry about the perception of a conflict of interest, not to mention other potential issues.

As well, how long could the good luck in the community last? His neighbours around the Church Street property have always been terrific, he admits. "Let's face it. A lot could have gone wrong here. We have big trucks coming through and customers parking. This kind of business has a lot of moving parts. We've been very fortunate."

A lumber company in old Brooklin, essentially a residential area, wouldn't happen today. "Nope, it's an old legal non-conforming use and I'm sure the neighbours will be delighted to see it go, although they've been great neighbours and we haven't had any complaints."

Having grown up in the business and working at it as a child himself, Mitchell figures that it worked for its time, but he couldn't imagine anyone else taking it over. He hasn't yet looked at what is to be done with the buildings and land. The structure where the retail store, originally a chicken coop, stands was built in 1967.

And so after a lifetime living in and around Mitchell Lumber, Don Mitchell can now focus more on his political career. When asked if the closing that Saturday would feel weird, he replies, "The weird part will be Monday morning when no one opens the door."

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