

# Downtown: as Paul Nielsen sees it

## The Acton Free Press

Ninety-Eighth Year. - No. 21 ACTON, ONTARIO, WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 22, 1972

Second Section

At a special meeting of the Development Commission called to discuss future projects, merchant Paul Nielsen read his presentation which reviewed past attempts and looked to the future of the town's Central Business District. His presentation, which was acclaimed by those attending, follows.

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Recently a series of articles in "The Acton Free Press" expressed concern about the central business district in Acton. Through the Acton Chamber of Commerce and as a businessman with large investments in this area, I have for many years been in the midst of almost everything which took place in the C.B.D. (Central Business District). I offer the following as a biased, but informed viewpoint.

The only rational approach would be to take a complete survey of the entire town and proceed from there, through analysis to conclusion. The most complete survey of Acton took place in 1964 and was done as an exercise under Professor Dakin of the University of Toronto. The final document is a book of almost 1,000 folio pages. This book covers most aspects of life in Acton and I greatly recommend it as reading for anyone who is truly interested in gaining knowledge in the broader aspects of town planning as it affects Acton. It would be very helpful in a university world update this book and interesting to find out how correct the predictions were. To have this done by professionals would probably cost in excess of \$50,000.

### Recommendations

The team who did the C.B.D. and the economics of the study made the unequivocal recommendation that future major commercial activity should take place in the C.B.D. and came up with several suggestions as to how this could be done.

Later the council hired a professional firm to assist in arriving at a conceptual plan for the town of Acton. Project planners again recommended to confine future major commercial activity to the C.B.D. In fact, this concern for the main street in any town is repeated in almost all professional planning.

Strange as it seems, the chairman of the Acton Planning Board, and I hope the paper misquoted him, would like to see future major commercial development take place east of the town.

### Easy solution

Probably some of the town fathers (councillors) would like to see a large shopping center as a nice easy solution to a baffling and complex problem. Since many items cannot be stocked in a small town, some exotic items have to be obtained from larger shopping

Some councillors are taking a serious and knowledgeable view of the relationship between the C.B.D. and the rest of the town. Some feel that if the core of the town is lost, in essence, the town is lost.

It is a fact that the C.B.D. is supplying Acton with essential services and as the population grows it will be able to supply more and better services. At present there are 85 commercial establishments located in the C.B.D. There is a simple equation called Reilly's Law which will tell you the probable trade area of a town or shopping area. It is based on the principle that the

attractiveness of a town is in direct proportion to the distance it is away from and in inverse proportion to the relative size of other towns.

### Acton hinterland

If we knew nothing whatever of people's shopping habits by applying Reilly's Law, we would soon find that Acton is really hinterland to the greater regional town of Guelph, and that Guelph, in turn, is hinterland to the Kitchener-Waterloo area. Consider the following statistics taken from Canada statistics:

### HISTORY OF RETAIL SALES 1850 to 1941

YEAR	TOWN	POPULATION	NO. OF STORES	SALES (in '000s)	SALES PER CAPITA
1930	Acton	1855	38	475.8	257
	Georgetown	2288	60	899.2	392
	Halton	26,358	361	5757.1	217
1941	Acton	2063	43	708.9	343
	Georgetown	2562	56	1331.0	516
	Halton	28,515	394	8071.5	283
1951	Acton	2890	49	2516.2	870
	Georgetown	3452	59	4897.5	1420
	Halton	44,003	444	34,238.5	770
1961	Acton	4144	45	3787.2	909
	Georgetown	10,298	95	8871.8	861
	Kitchener-Waterloo	220,568		168,464.1	764
	Guelph	98,772		69,667.0	704
	Fergus	20,966		6,709.2	320

### Acton highest

It is interesting to see that Georgetown when it was a smaller town, and before Brampton developed, was far ahead of Acton in per capita expenditure and that Acton now has the highest per capita sales of any of the places mentioned. Many conclusions can be drawn from these statistics, but I am neither equipped nor inclined to write an economic treatise, and here it is sufficient to say that the citizens of Acton are patronizing their local merchants to a greater extent than citizens in other centres do.

Of course this will change if the population of Acton grows and the shopping area does not.

### Shop at home

Although it is obvious that there will always be people who will prefer to travel to a large mall or department store to do their shopping, it is equally clear that many people prefer to do business with the small town merchant. Since many items cannot be stocked in a small town, some exotic items have to be obtained from larger shopping

areas. This situation will likely never change since Acton is not laid out as a regional centre in the provincial plan.

It seems to me that the citizens of Acton have clearly indicated that they prefer to "shop in town". It is therefore up to the merchant to maintain and nourish this attitude. They must increase the availability of goods and services and merchandise accordingly. They must have more special events, etc. Property owners must upgrade their buildings and generally the entire C.B.D. must improve its appearance, parking facilities included.

How can this be brought about? And where does the responsibility lie? And why has not more been done to date? A quick look at the attempts to solve some of the problems may be useful.

### Parking committee

The town formed a parking committee some years ago. They came up with a series of suggestions with regard to flow of traffic, including making some streets one way. The net result was, as I see it, a loss of parking space, but a much greater facility for moving traffic and perhaps a safer traffic



Paul Nielsen and Acton's bustling "main stem" of commerce.

(Photo by J. Jennings)

businesses closed or moved, but I am optimistic that this slack will be taken up shortly, hopefully by energetic new business people.

The responsibility for upgrading the stores already here must rest with the individual business person; he is easily motivated and should be a self starter. The property owner is harder to reach, but both are greatly influenced by the attitude of the business climate, including and particularly the attitude of council. Planning aspects are important. Certainly no major store will ever attempt to locate in the C.B.D. unless they feel the Council can and will contribute to solving the parking problem. Because of past years of ad hoc development, it is simply not good enough to say: put up your own parking. It is even now questionable if large scale improvements to present facilities (shopping) can be supported unless some way is found to add to present parking facilities. This in itself tends to hold back improvement and upgrading.

Thus it seems that leadership in regard to parking must come from council or its appointed authority. If council does not appoint an authority, it is not very likely to be forthcoming.

### Traffic concern

Traffic is another concern which must be council's responsibility, particularly through truck traffic. Millions of tons of cargo are shipped straight through this town every year on two major highways. This creates noise, pollution, and danger to our citizens. Certainly a truck route or by-pass would absorb both noise and pollution with less danger to people. But strong representation must be made to the province to convince them that we need this type of road in the near future.

It should be pointed out that a great deal of co-operation between the people in the C.B.D. and the council and council appointed bodies or commissions is already taking place, for instance, the Christmas light display is a three way responsibility shared by the Chamber of Commerce, the Hydro Commission and the Council. More projects and activities can and must be generated if the C.B.D. is to remain viable and continue to contribute financially and socially to the town life.

In many towns such projects as the Norwich Plan have successfully been undertaken and perhaps this would be a good starting point, but it has got to be realized that much more is required to assure a future for the C.B.D.

### Improvement area

One possible way of getting started would be if the merchants, through the Chamber of Commerce requested that the Council declare a certain area as a "business improvement area." Then the council would forward a letter to all business people in this area saying that unless a petition was taken up against it, that on a certain date it would pass a by-law making the area an improvement area, and that an increase in business tax would be levied at x per mill.

The council would appoint a commission or board of management, preferably of three members, one from council and two from the assessed businesses, to spend the money thus obtained on improvements to municipal property over and above what would normally be done at the town's expense. Also this money should go towards business promotion, such as advertising, festive banners, Christmas lights, special events, etc. Of course this method would be a good start to bring the C.B.D. up to scratch. There is a better method.

After having carefully determined what the projected need in the form of parking and improvement would be, the Council could issue debentures for what ever the amount would come to, and then lead the cost into the area where it was spent.

### Prime areas suitable

At this time, prime areas suitable for parking are available, and others will soon be on the market. It seems quite certain that unless something is done now, and done on a fairly large scale, we will find the C.B.D. in a bind. I am convinced that if this area is to continue to contribute in the many ways it does to the town life, we must make a move now. The council must take a stand on whether they will let the area deteriorate or develop. The business men must provide the impetus to growth.

(Continued on Page B6)

### Set park hours for snowmobiles

Following the policy they used last winter, Acton Parks Board will allow snowmobiles to operate in Prospect Park between 7 a.m. and 11 p.m. on weekdays and Saturdays and 9 a.m. and 11 p.m. on Sundays.

Snowmobiles will not be allowed to operate in Sir Donald Mann Park in Glenora. A hill in the park is used almost daily by young tobogganers during the winter.

### New sign

A large new sign has been installed at Robt's Canadian Fried Chicken store on Mill St.

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