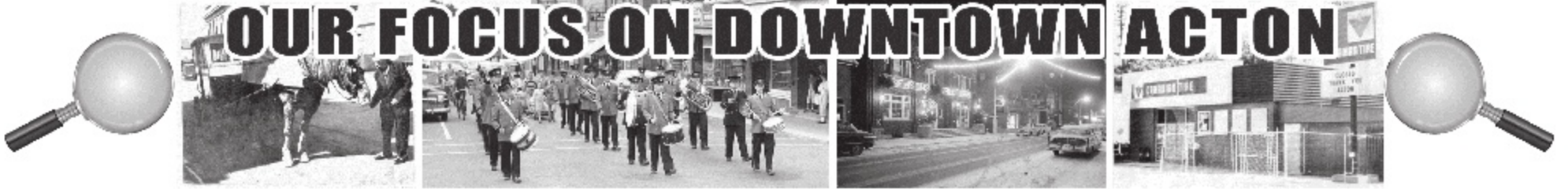


OUR FOCUS ON DOWNTOWN ACTON



A concerning number of vacant stores downtown

Councillor Mike Albano on downtown revitalization

By: Dawn Brown

Acton BIA Manager Sheena Switzer acknowledges that the number of vacant stores in Acton's downtown is a concern, but Switzer explained that the BIA with the aid of the Town of Halton Hills's economic team is addressing the issue and through the BIA's strategic plan and initiatives that she believes will help to revitalize the downtown.

"We are trying to attract real estate agents and letting them know about the space that's available here," Switzer said, adding, "We're also trying to work with landlords to pair them up with potential entrepreneurs, and work with different ideas for temporary filling of spaces so people can see that they're flexible and the different uses that the spaces might be able to have downtown."

Doug Penrice, Economic Development Officer for The Town of Halton Hills, stated that revitalizing Acton's downtown is a priority for the Town and has been for the past year.

"We've been working with the BIA for the past year, first with Beth (Paisley) and now with Sheena (Switzer) and the Board of Directors there to come up with plans and ideas

to move things forward," Penrice said.

A number of initiatives were developed over the past year, including a First Impressions Program with Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA), a meeting with local commercial realtors to gain their input for what needs to happen to attract new businesses to downtown, and two case studies performed by the University of Waterloo. Armed with this information, the BIA manager and board and the Town's economic development team created the BIA Strategic Plan.

The 22 page document is an in-depth report that touches on everything from the purpose of the BIA, to priorities, to challenges, as well as listing seven strategies for the downtown that all fall under one of BIA's three main functions: Environment / Beautification, Economic Development, and Social / Community.

Switzer and Penrice presented the BIA's strategic plan to the Mayor and council at the Town's last council meeting in February.

Currently, the BIA Board and Penrice have put together a report to go before the Corporate Affairs Committee later this

month. While Penrice was not ready to reveal the report's contents, he stated that it will "put some money where our mouth is."

"That (the report) has to be approved by council," Penrice explained, adding, "Our council is very receptive to anything we can do to enhance any development in downtown Acton."

While the town and BIA have been working steadily to revitalize Acton's downtown, Penrice admits there are no easy answers. "The solutions are not easy. It's challenging. So, we've been looking at all options to say, 'What's the best way to attract business back into the downtown core?' It's challenging, and we'll be looking at a variety of things that could be done and will be done."

The BIA, as a means of attracting businesses to the downtown, have also developed an informational package for commercial realtors that show the best of what Acton has to offer. The BIA also plans to participate in events like the At Home in the Hills Show through the Halton Hills Chamber of Commerce to show what's available to local businesses.

"We have a lot of really wonderful small businesses in downtown Acton that can really benefit from the support of their local community," Switzer said. "Sometimes you don't always see what's right in your own backyard."

By: Harry Rudolfs

Councillor Mike Albano, whose ward includes most of downtown Acton, was elected in a by-election a year and a half ago. He is also Town Council's representative on the Acton Business Improvement Association.

Albano's electoral platform focused on revitalization of the downtown core and finding solutions to the vacant storefront situation. He responded via email to questions from *The New Tanner*.

Q: During the election campaign you talked about "Implementation of the Facade Improvement Program to help revitalize the downtown." Is this program available and ongoing? Are any storefront owners taking advantage of this?

A: The Facade program is available to all BIA members. Members can apply for financial support to improve their business, eg of items that business may request assistance for are sign boards, awnings, painting, chemical cleaning, and repairs. The program is ongoing, a number of stores such as Staying Alive Fitness have participated. The BIA office already has inquiries for 2017. Information regarding this program is available through the Acton BIA office.

Q: You also promised "Constructive solutions to vacant buildings in down-

town Acton" How do we get around this problem? Why are we losing businesses downtown? What is the strategy going forward?

A: For many people Acton is a bedroom community. Although people live here they may not shop and dine in town. The BIA and the Towns Economic Development team are exploring a variety of options and are also working with the region. We have already begun by reaching out to local real estate agents and creating a listing of available retail space.

Q: Some people see parking as a problem? If people can't find parking they're less likely to come downtown. What are your thoughts on this?

A: There is parking on Main and Mill streets as well; there are three municipal parking lots with plenty of parking to accommodate those shopping or visiting the downtown

Q: What kind of businesses would be attracted to come to Acton downtown and how can we encourage them to do so?

A: Being positioned in a high volume area, Acton has the potential to be an attractive home for retail, dining and professional services alike. Creative entrepreneurs with the ability to leverage the traffic with signage and advertising can absolutely thrive in Downtown Ac-

ton. The Acton BIA has now a Strategic Plan in place..(with) a number of actions. Beautification of the downtown core and creating an inviting environment for all

Q: Your platform also mentioned that you wanted to help artists display their work. How can this tie in with revitalization? Is there a way to attract artisans and their enterprises? Is this a way to go?

A: Arts and culture are very important to me. As the branding moves forward there will be opportunities to encourage local artists and landlords to possibly negotiate rental terms, offer temporary space for art retail and art shows, and exploring grants opportunities to encourage a vibrant artistic community.

Q: How do we make downtown more attractive to shop owners and shoppers alike, both in the short term and the long term? Do you see any light at the end of the tunnel?

A: Beautifying our downtown, both in its physical appearance and its branding, messaging are key components of the Strategic Plan. By creating a positive, attractive downtown, we will also be showcasing the best that we have to offer as a community to both current and potential new business. The BIA is planning to offer training and resources to business owners so that they stay current and competitive.

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Advertorial

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Yes its me again. Knox Presbyterian Church. It has been a while since we last talked and I thought I would let you know I am still here.

My people are fussing around here getting me ready for the March Break Vacation Bible School.

Come see me some time. I am here every Sunday morning from 10:30 to 11:30 for the Church Service and watch for the other events I get to put up with.

I don't get any rest at all.



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