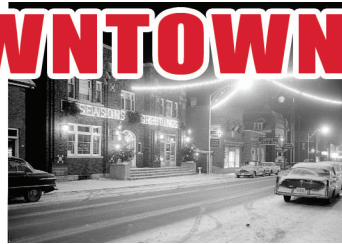
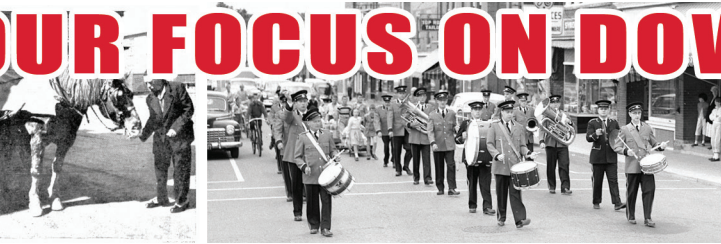


OUR FOCUS ON DOWNTOWN ACTON



Business owner's perspective on the future

By: Alex Hilson

Downtown Acton business owners recently commented on ways to develop the Downtown core and to bring more business into Acton.

Leanne Monaghan from Staying Alive Fitness was one such owner. Having been in business for over 12 years, Downtown Acton is home to her. But there are things that she could see improved.

"I'm sure I won't be popular for saying this, but our main street lacks heart and soul. Narrow streets and truck traffic make it difficult and dangerous to navigate. Having said this, at one time our main street was vibrant and healthy and I believe we have the potential to make our way back there again."

Monaghan recognizes there's no single solution, but suggests commercial taxes are high and a tax break for a five-year period would help the main street grow. Also, incentives for start up businesses.

Another concern

is closed storefronts. While there is a Facade Improvement Program for businesses, that doesn't help stores that are already closed. Frank Gataveckas from Vinyl-and has put some thought into this challenge. "So, if there is a store for a rent, the landlord should be approached by the Town and told 'we have a facade we're going to be putting up for a while.' It can still be 'for rent' but it's going to be the kind of the thing that's going to keep the continuity of the place going."

Gataveckas, though new to the block, has other advice for local business owners based on what he sees working for his store. "When I first started the business, I purposely did the signage and the washing, the cleaning, and the shoveling, which shows there's a caring attitude. There's an interactivity with the people that are walking around outside and that just brings more people around, and I think activity is a very important thing."

Councillor Albano thinks rebranding is the answer to Downtown woes

By: Harry Rudolfs

Councillor Mike Albano admitted that Acton's downtown is hurting. A year since our last interview, and there are more vacant stores. And the dowdy section of Mill Street between Willow and John will be even harder hit when the CIBC pulls out in March.

But Albano thinks that the Strategic Plan, developed over the last two years by the BIA and Town staff, will be able to turn things around. He's particularly enthusiastic about the "rebranding" strategy outlined in the document.

"Many small towns are suffering from the same thing," he said. "But if you look at Elora, they've rebranded themselves and they've found a niche for the town. At one time, we had all the leather stores. That was a niche. Now it's a matter of finding something else."

Albano explained that the strategic plan is a multi-year endeavour that will be rolled out in phases. The first step, he said, is to develop a new logo, improve signage and increase social



media awareness of Acton. "We'll probably be launching a new website at the same time. I just wish we could fill the stores. Once we get the rebranding in place, we can make that happen."

"Other stuff like replacing the mural and planters will have to be budgeted. It will cost money—that's why it's a long-term plan. You can't do everything in one year."

Albano suggested one problem is that Acton can't grow because it's surrounded by greenbelt. As well, "This is a bedroom community and

many people are probably shopping closer to where they work. There are also the big box stores that are close by and people are also shopping on-line. We have great shops, great restaurants, the problem is getting people down here," he said.

Parking is another factor that is often cited as problematic. People driving through town seem reluctant to stop because they see only a few street parking spots on Mill Street or Main. But Albano doesn't understand why it's an issue. "We have free parking in Acton at the GO station and downtown. But if you look at the parking lot on Willow Ave. it's always empty," He hopes that the new signage will make it easier for visitors to park.

The situation is not completely gloomy according to Albano. Several shop owners have taken advantage of the matching facade grants—up to \$12,500—available from the BIA, and funding available from the Community Improvement Program (CIP). There are also some new businesses opening up to replace the ones that have left, he added. "There's a law firm moving in where the Stardust Cafe was, and somebody's opening up where Artsy-Phartsy was."

Albano also mentioned pop up stores might be a short-term solution: pro-

viding low-rental retail spaces on a temporary basis. "One of the things we can actually do is promote the local artist. If we could negotiate something with a landlord on a short-term basis, we can give those artists a place to display their work," he said.

"The problem is that many of the landlords don't live in town. We have stores that have been vacant for a long time and one landlord who isn't interested in engaging with us," he said.

But Albano was not willing to entertain the idea of a vacant storefront tax for those locations that are shabby and continuously unoccupied. "You can't do that. You can't tax people on the way they run their business."

But another Acton councillor, Clark Somerville, doesn't dismiss the idea of a dormancy tax entirely. "I know Oakville is looking at charging vacant stores. I haven't had a report from them yet."

Somerville thinks that the out-of-town landlords may be out of touch with the rental market. "They're looking that they need 'Y' for their rent and in some cases they have their rent a little too high," he said. "I know one case where they had their rent low to attract businesses and then they jacked it up... But even Erin has vacant stores."

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