

MANY CHALLENGES FACING LOCAL BUSINESSES: OWNER

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Getting around Halton Hills without a car has never been easy, and with the increasing opportunities in the area, a need for better transportation is felt more than ever.

So says Robert Guillemette, who moved to town last summer and currently has no plans of buying a car.

"I'm lucky that I'm relatively fit and am able to walk places. There's not a whole lot of options," he said.

While the town offers transportation services such as ActiVan Accessible Transit and the Taxi Scrip Program, "it's not an option for everyone," said Guillemette. "It's not completely publicly accessible."

From having no ride share services about four years ago to multiple options today, the town is dedicated to improving local transit connectivity, said acclaimed Wards 1 and 2 Coun. Clark Somerville.

He pointed to returning GO train services — halted during the pandemic — as an example of this.

Due to disruptions during the height of COVID, a two-way all-day GO service between Kitchener and Toronto — originally scheduled to be completed by 2025 — is now expected to be in place by 2028.

The next phase of the

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— Shania Rios

town's transit plan would offer GO services connecting Georgetown "to a place like Toronto Premium Outlet," said Somerville.

Residents also shared concerns about what they feel is insufficient housing availability and affordability for the next generation, and for those looking to move to Halton Hills.

"In my neighbourhood, as soon as a house goes for sale, it's bought. So, I don't think we have enough space right now," said Shania Rios, who's been living in Georgetown with her parents for about seven years.

Rios said while she enjoys being part of the community, buying a home by herself here is just not feasible.

"I'd probably have to leave Georgetown if I wanted to afford something by myself," she said.

Said former councillor Ted Brown: "Council will no doubt find the housing,

especially affordable housing, to meet the needs of the town, increasingly elusive."

Longtime Halton Hills resident Susan Gordon suggested a "smart sustainable" growth plan within areas in Georgetown already zoned for housing would help improve the housing supply.

"Because of increasing economic concerns, there needs to be a focus on affordable housing and multi-unit homes that are accessible to all, including seniors and people with disabilities," said Gordon. "I think consideration should also be given to change current bylaws so existing homeowners with larger lots are able to build extra living quarters on their property, possibly for their aging parents or adult children," she added.

Vision Georgetown would also affect the housing capacity, said Somerville. The 1,000-acre mixed-use development expected to be complete by 2025 is said to be the future home of 19,000 residents and 1,700 jobs, according to the project website.

Rios — who adores the small-town feel of Halton Hills — says it would be tricky to retain that environment with the increasing efforts to offer more transportation and housing options.

A greater community



Reeti M. Rohilla/Metroland

Robert Guillemette feels residents would benefit from improved transit services.

involvement with initiatives such as the Georgetown Fair and events at the Helson Gallery would help retain the small-town feel, said Rios.

"Half of the land mass in Halton Hills is protected either by the Niagara Escarpment or the Greenbelt. So, there is not that much space to build when half of it is already protected," said Somerville.

Unlike some municipalities, Halton Hills has always pushed for a slow, incremental growth, said Somerville.

Local businesses — that have proven to be avid community supporters at sporting events, fundraisers and other initiatives —

require post-pandemic support to get back on their feet, said Somerville.

Labour shortages exacerbated by the pandemic, lack of employment lands to expand on, and the competitive nature of the commercial rental market are some of the challenges faced by local businesses, he added.

Georgetown business owner Bei Chen said any support with rent, gas or hydro would help local businesses survive the time of COVID-19 topped with inflation. Even though his restaurant is takeout-only, Chen was hit with a 15 per cent decrease in sales — far less compared to several other busi-

nesses.

"The food cost has almost increased by 30 to 40 per cent," said Chen, who's also faced challenges with hiring and retaining employees over the past two years.

Somerville said the town must also work with the chamber and the business community to introduce a land rezoning that allows businesses to easily switch locations or open potential ones.

Posts stirring up conversations of a delayed ambulance and other medical services due to a strain on the health-care system have become common occurrences on community social media pages.

Improvement and expansion of the hospital and other medical services takes time, said Brown.

"Late in the previous term, the outgoing council learned the importance of, and has had to realize the needs of a hospital to be constructed within Halton Hills," said Brown.

To cater to the growing demand, Brown said the new town council would have to find the funding and land to build a hospital on.

STORY BEHIND THE STORY: With the municipal election now over, we wanted to examine what the top issues are facing the new council.

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