

Merchants and municipality stuck for a solution

There is a controversy quietly simmering behind the store fronts of the Town of Penetanguishene for which no one seems able to find a solution.

For the past decade-and-a-half the Main Street, commercial core, has been faced with an identity crisis.

Like most small Canadian towns, the main street in Penetanguishene was the backbone of the community's economic well being and future, providing goods and services for the community and the surrounding area, as well as providing employment.

Penetanguishene is unique. With its proximity to Midland, residents are offered a wider variety of places to shop. That, combined with malls on Highway 93, created stiff business competition for local merchants.

As a result businesses on Penetanguishene's main street have suffered.

The problem was identified in the mid 1970's, when the town council conducted a study to determine what could be done to revitalize the business district.

There was a proposal made to institute a Business Improvement Area (BIA) in Penetanguishene, but the local merchants could not agree on the proposal and the plan was turned down.

In 1980, council amended its commercial zoning bylaw in an effort to stimulate a revitalization of the commercial core.

Prior to the amendment, property zoned "commercial general" could include a percentage of residential accommodation. With the amendment commercial property could be rezoned residential.

As a result, the Fern Shoe Factory was converted into residential accommodation. But little change occurred in the business core of Main Street until recently.

Again in 1983, a study was undertaken into a commercial facade improvement program but the net result was no change.

The municipality and the merchants have charged each other with being apathetic.

According to Town Planner Paul Hodgins, the

municipality has tried on two occasions to stimulate revitalization in the area and have adopted a wait and see attitude.

"We are letting market conditions prevail."

Ken Gauthier, of Gauthier Sports, agrees there is a problem on Main Street.

"Tax dollars from the business area are not being spent on (business) property."

He said that a BIA was not necessarily the answer, adding that the Chamber of Commerce (C of C) should be better funded.

Entrepreneur Ray McLarney, owner of property, formerly Marie's dressmaking store, on Main Street says there is a problem attracting business to Main Street.

McLarney advertised the property for rent for more than a year without any response.

"I dropped the rent to a ridiculously low figure," said McLarney who opted to put two luxury apartments in the store. He adds that this is not the alternative he would have preferred.

Most of the merchants on the street were sympathetic to McLarney's predicament, saying they would probably have done the same in similar circumstances.

But not all see turning former businesses into residences as a solution to the problem.

Glen Bryant, of Bryant's Jewellers, says the main street is at a low point of a cycle and believes attracting young people as potential businessmen would help the area.

"A younger outlook would strengthen Main Street."

In recent years the chamber has suffered from a poor image and lack of input from the business community.

As recently as last year, factions within the chamber were polarized. They could not agree as to whether the organization should emphasize the promotion of business or help stimulate tourism which in its turn would bring money into the community.

Bill Waters, past president of chamber says a strong chamber would help Main Street and is opposed to a BIA.

Waters' main complaint with the BIA was that there was no long term accounting of what the merchants share of improvement costs would be.

Waters also added that there had been improvement on Main Street, he noted that more than 18 business had improved their property or expanded during the past five years.

Perhaps the strongest supporters of a BIA were Bryant and Al Zylich of Bay Drugs.

Zylich, who was in favour of the initial BIA proposal, would not comment on the present situation saying it is too sensitive.

However, Bryant said a BIA would be good for the commercial district.

"A BIA is very important".

Like Waters, Bryant is

optimistic about the business district's future.

"There is growth in Penetanguishene. I'm see-

ing many new customers. And there is optimism toward the downtown area."

Bryant also noted that almost 60 per cent of his customers come from Midland, adding that

future merchants have to offer specialized and personal service in order to attract business.



Main Street



MOUNTAINVIEW MALL

CKMP 1230

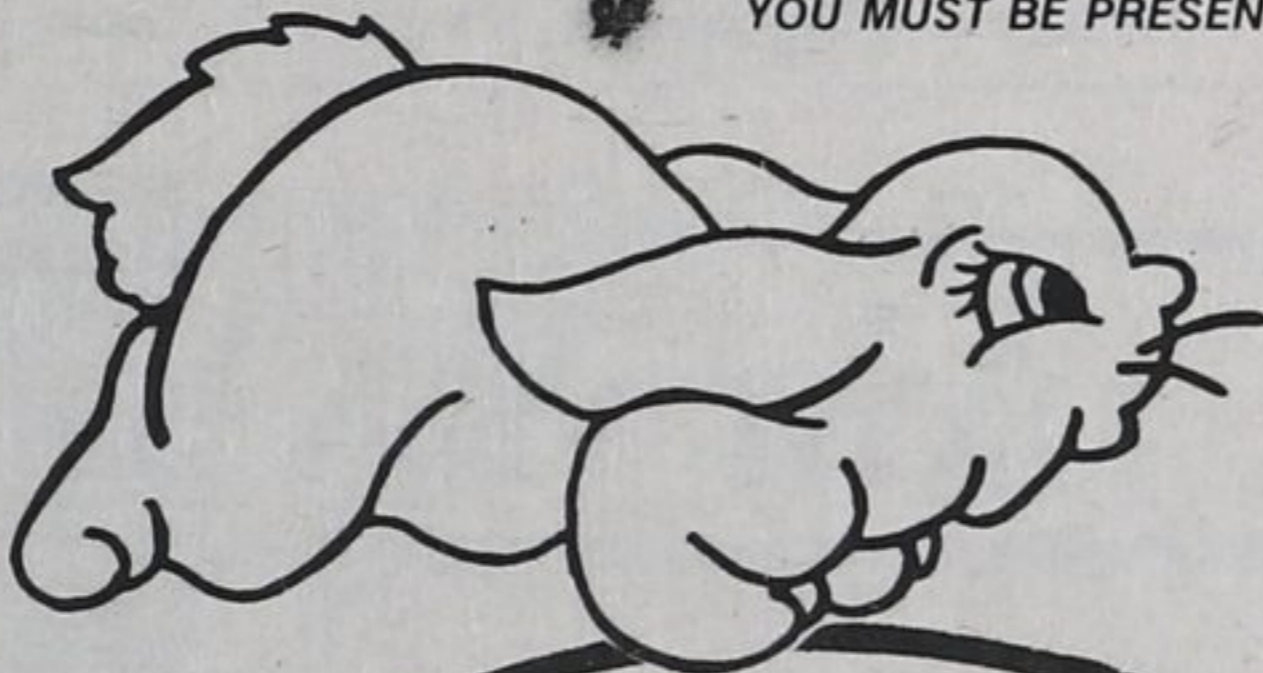
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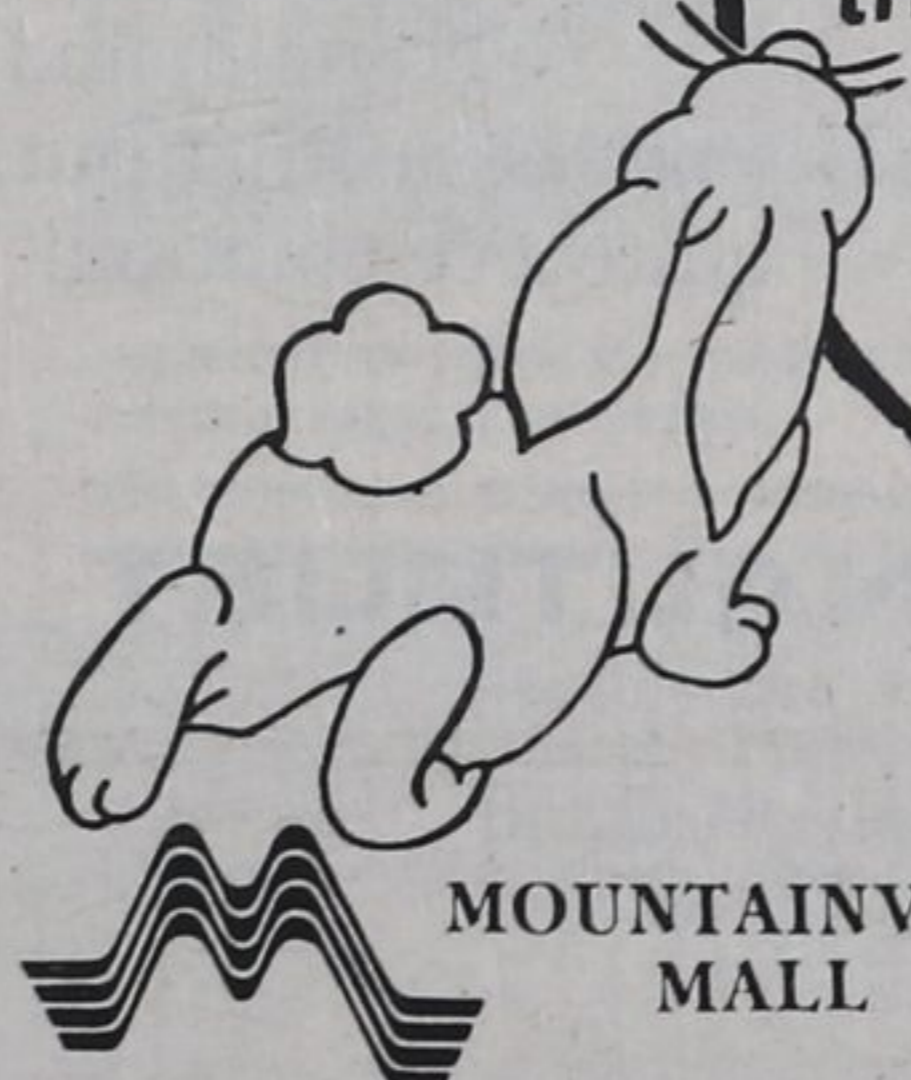
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Marie's