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## Small business woes

Yet another business located on the main drag in Essex has closed its doors. For some unknown reason, this recent addition to the streetscape didn't last more than a few months. Like many other small businesses, it tried to operate in the downtown core but couldn't make a go of it.

Based on the number of empty storefronts in Essex, it's easy to arrive at the conclusion that the economic health of our community is at risk. It's even easier to

start playing the

### editorial

*laurie brett*

blame game, which is famous for its patently unfair (and undocumented) set of rules. In the blame game, any number of official bodies and/or individuals can become convenient targets for misplaced barbs. One step forward and two steps back results in negative advancement on the game board.

As Small Business Week approaches – October 15 to 21 – we owe it to ourselves to be informed about the relative success rate of small business. Research shows that small businesses are especially vulnerable to failure. According to Statistics Canada data, about three-quarters of small businesses survive their first year of operation but less than one-third of businesses with less than five employees survive beyond five years.

If the statistics hold true for Essex, then one in four new businesses will close its doors within the first year. Two out of three new businesses with less than five employees will close shop within five years. That's why it's important to have new businesses standing on the threshold of vacant stores, waiting to open their doors.

It's not good for local morale to see so many empty storefronts, and it's perplexing that we haven't yet developed an economic development strategy for the municipality. But we have to keep some perspective on the situation. People say that the retail sprawl to the north of town is partly to blame for the empty storefronts, but they're also quick to point out that the town now has far more square footage devoted to commercial activity than ever before. Add to that the fact that area businesses employ thousands of local workers, support dozens of local charities, sports teams and organizations, and offer residents a wide range of products and services to choose from. Then you arrive at the conclusion that Essex is an important centre of commerce and a place of opportunity.

The outgoing town council struck an ad hoc economic development committee that delivered a report many months ago but little progress was made beyond that point. Hopefully the next council will pick up where this one left off, recognize that they have some responsibility to ensure a vibrant economic sector, and work towards developing some real solutions to a persistent problem.



It is generally considered more difficult for women to succeed in business, politics and many other vocations. In the post-war world, female high school students were directed towards secretarial, nursing and teaching jobs. After all, early guidance counsellors would advise girls that the degree they wanted was not a B.A. but an MRS. Since I come from that era, I have a number of friends who feel their opportunities were limited by that type of thinking, both at school and all too often at home.

But the years go by, and female staff shouldn't have to put up with male bosses at work addicted to pinching, inappropriate language, and crude jokes. Due to other laws, the office is no longer clouded by tobacco smoke. Yes, there is still prejudice against women in many workplaces, but while misogyny is alive, things do seem to be getting better.

One persistent problem is the attitude of women in charge of other women. Our credit manager for

many years at Rogers in Toronto was a great lady by the name of Glenna Hall. She had worked hard to make it and often was the



### opinion

*bill gay*

only woman in operations meetings. She protected her position with language that would do a lumberjack proud. Glenna was especially tough on other women. That was the first time I was aware that there was no corresponding female version to the "Old Boys' Club".

Countless times in the intervening years I have seen women put the proverbial knife in the backs of other women in business. I once worked with a very

competent individual who would give a pay raise to virtually any man who asked for one. But she also seemed to feel that every woman except herself should be on minimum wage. Go figure.

Years ago on Essex Council, a female councillor attempted to put the skids under a female senior staffer by attempting to organize meetings at her own home with that individual not in attendance. I, along with a strong majority of Council, made it known we would attend no meetings any place without that department head there. My conscience remains clear to this day that I took no part in any meetings that would hurt a dedicated employee.

So there you have it. Women's path to success outside the home is still fraught with peril. But I have found that all women really want is to have their work considered on a gender-free basis, strictly on merit, the same as a man in the same job. It doesn't sound like too much to ask.



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