



STAFF PHOTO/HANELLORE VOLPE

Suze Joyce outside her downtown Stouffville store.

Merchants cry foul over red tape

BY HANELLORE VOLPE
Staff Writer

Merchants looking to do business in downtown Stouffville have faced frustration and costly delays because of conflicting messages from town departments, they say.

The operators of the Emerald Isle bistro and bar were held up two months before they could open an outdoor patio on Main Street.

After applying to the town in January, restaurant owner Kulam Yokerathinam expected to have the patio ready for customers by the beginning of June.

That's when he received a call from the town saying he would have to double his insurance coverage. By the time everything was in place,

the Strawberry Festival and its thousands of visitors had come and gone. Mr. Yokerathinam was able to open the patio this month.

Suze Joyce had to delay opening the Healing Force shop on Main Street by six weeks, to March of 2003.

She thought she had the OK from the town's building department for the changes required to get her health food and healthy living store ready for business.

But a week before her original opening date, she was told by the fire department she had to put emergency lighting at the front and back doors.

"I almost wasn't able to open because I didn't have these lights," the entrepreneur said.

"I was held up six weeks." There didn't appear to be a lot of communication between town departments when it came to their requirements, she added.

MAYOR REACTS

But the lack of clarity in communication goes both ways, Mayor Sue Sherban said in an interview.

Problems often arise when business owners come to the town with an idea, then make changes part way through the process, she said. That leads to changes in building and fire code requirements.

Since buildings in the downtown core are older structures, many entrepreneurs aren't aware of what is required to have their buildings come up to 2004 standards or the costs involved, Mrs. Sherban said.

To try to resolve the issue, she called a meeting of the BIA (Stouffville Business Improvement Area), local merchants and town staff early in the summer. Mrs. Joyce had raised the issue with the mayor earlier in the year.

Sara Marsala, who opened the Tempest in a Teapot on Main Street a year ago, noted "there didn't seem to be consistency between the fire department and the town".

She was told by one department she would need to have a fire wall constructed.

That requirement was reversed by another department.

Then she was again told the fire wall was mandatory before an alternate solution

was found. Changing a strictly retail operation, such as a book store, into a restaurant calls different parts of the building and fire codes into effect.

"The codes are very extensive," Whitchurch-Stouffville Fire Chief Tim Beckett said. "They are not easy for the lay person to read."

Codes are strictly adhered to for the safety of the town's residents, he noted.

MISCOMMUNICATION

He noted there had been some miscommunication between the building and fire departments in the past.

To rectify the situation, Chief Beckett has been working more closely with Tom Parry of the planning department since last September to reduce the communication gap and provide a more uniform message for the entire town.

Town staff are preparing a package of information so new entrepreneurs know what the requirements are before they can open their doors.

Included will be a question-and-answer form for new business owners to provide more information for town staff.

The BIA will be part of the consultation process, Mayor Sherban noted.

"We are trying to encourage people to do things downtown and develop the downtown," Stouffville BIA chairperson Eric Button said. "Let's help them."

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