



Out in Write Field

By Bruce Stapley

Back in the early 1970's, when the proposed straightening of Kennedy Rd. threatened to wipe out many of downtown Unionville's heritage buildings, local interest groups banded together to force a bypass and preserve that village's historic character. So successful was this drive that Unionville's Main Street emerged as THE small town destination in the GTA.

Stouffville's downtown has never faced such a threat. Instead, it has had to contend with a combination of factors which have conspired to prevent it from joining the elite of small town business cores in Southern Ontario. Most notable

of the negatives, it could be argued, has been the handful of self-serving, negligent landlords -- not to mention one particularly tacky and offensive north side Main Street "store" whose owner has delighted in thumbing his nose at council and the town in general for years.

The lack of a "theme" store such as Port Perry's pioneering Settlement House has also contributed. Some merchants see the culprit as a local council and citizenry whom, they suggest, are unappreciative of the value of a flourishing downtown business core.

There are those who would suggest the problem lies in an endless parade of unimaginative shops with unworkable or nonexistent business plans offered up through the decades. The Treasures of Montezuma springs to mind, an early 1980's retail misadventure identifiable by the suit of armour which was marched out onto the front sidewalk each day.

But it must be pointed out there have been, and continue to be, many daring, visionary entrepreneurs -- take a bow Charlotte Cave, Pat Montgomery, David Barthau, Suze Joyce, Sara Marsala, Ville Papas, Rob Reid, Kim Everson, Patricia and Carey Yeoman, and Love of Jo founders Jo and Grant Ivens, to mention a few.

With the town's west end having established itself as the place where people go to purchase most everyday essentials and big ticket items, the downtown has been left to carve a niche for itself as

a destination worthy of the patronage of locals and visitors looking for that special place to spend their discretionary income, or to take advantage of the services offered there. The Hoover Park and Millard bypasses will eventually eliminate most of the traffic that is just passing through town, and with the coming of 19 On The Park, the time should be right for downtown Stouffville's coming out party.

As someone who made a living on Main Street as a retailer back in the 1980's, and in more recent years selling newspaper advertising, I am particularly sensitive to the plight of those who would attempt to thrive in downtown Stouffville. I believe that our downtown core can still become a jewel, that the pieces are in place to make it a spot where locals and visitors beat a path to enjoy unique shopping, inspired dining and much needed services. But we need standards that landlords must adhere to, along with a continued and even stronger determination by existing merchants and services to band together to draw both eager customers and would-be mainstay businesses downtown.

I choose to see the glass as half full at this point for the downtown business section. Excitement begets excitement, so it's a matter of all stakeholders -- merchants, residents, council, and other interested parties -- selling the concept of a vibrant, attractive business core whose time has come.

We'll all be the better for it.

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