



Leaders address revitalization

By PETER CRISCIONE
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The City of Brampton will have to win the support of citizens and the local business community if it is truly to succeed in efforts to revitalize the downtown.

At least that was the message delivered by Kitchener's director of economic development, the keynote speaker at an event hosted by the Brampton Downtown Development Corporation (BDDC) yesterday.

"This (downtown redevelopment) isn't for the faint of heart," said Rod Regier, addressing some 100 people during the BDDC's annual general meeting held at the Rose Theatre. "This process takes a lot of time and a lot of effort and citizen engagement is key."

Kitchener has spent more than a decade breathing new life into its core and Regier was invited to offer some insight on that municipality's experiences.

Regier said the push to revitalize Kitchener's downtown coincided, in part, with the emergence of the region's technology-based industry headed by companies like Research In Motion (RIM).

High-tech firms have struggled over the years to attract new talent and Regier said city officials acknowledged the importance of making Kitchener appealing to a new class of professionals.

Since then, Kitchener has invested millions of dollars in refashioning its main street, provided grants to businesses for façade improvements, partnered with the private sector to transform industrial brown field sites into new residential and commercial space, revamped public buildings, and attracted educational institutions to the core.

"Our high-technology companies are in a bare-knuckle fight for talent with companies around the world, particularly in the west coast of the United States and Canada," Regier said. "The thing that we have to offer them is a great city. That's the only thing that we can use to attract talent and that is why downtown has become part of the fundamental element of our economic development strategy."

However, Regier stressed that efforts to revitalize downtown Kitchener haven't been easy. Revamping a city centre required a lot of time, money and planning and crucial to the endeavour was securing the support of businesses and the citizenry.

For one, Kitchener's downtown redevelopment has been greatly helped by a \$110 million city fund financed by a 1.2 per cent levy— not always a popular option with taxpayers.

Also, downtown businesses have had to endure disruption to operations as road construction siphoned off the flow of customer traffic for long stretches.

Redevelopment can be "inconvenient" and Regier suggested engaging stakeholders and getting them to fully buy into the idea of revitalization is central to the success of such an initiative.

"Redevelopment is a risky proposition," said Regier. "It takes a long time and people have to be prepared to live with it for a while."

Regier said Brampton is well positioned in its efforts to beef up the core.

Chief among this city's attributes is its proximity to Toronto and the rest of the GTA job market.

He suggested an advantage that Brampton has over Kitchener is a robust housing market and better connectivity to major transportation hubs.

Regier's address to BDDC members was preceded by remarks from Brampton Mayor Susan Fennell who touched



Growth. The City of Brampton will have to win the support of citizens and the local business community if it is truly to succeed in efforts to revitalize the downtown. At least that was the message delivered by Kitchener's director of economic development, the keynote speaker at an event hosted by the Brampton Downtown Development Corporation (BDDC) Wednesday. *File photo*

on similar efforts by this city to revitalize the downtown area.

Mayor Fennell reiterated council's commitment to jump-start the city centre and listed the many projects that have sprung up over the last few years. She touted the success of the Rose Theatre, opened four years ago, as well as the various condominium projects currently under construction.

Fennell noted the new rapid transit system that will connect downtown Brampton to various points across Greater Toronto by 2012, efforts to redevelop the old Peel Memorial Hospital site and city plans to build a convention centre and hotel in the core.

"When people (ask) me what is (my) vision for the downtown, I say it quite clearly: Brampton is to be a city with a downtown core. A robust, vibrant contemporary place that people come to visit, people come to work, people come to recreate and people come to go to church," Fennell told the crowd.

About 4,000 people are expected to move to the city centre over the next several years.

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