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Should we emulate Kitchener's commitment to a new-look downtown?

By RICK DRENNAN

Rome wasn't built in a day. Nor were its symbols of beauty. Patience is not only a virtue when city building, but a downright necessity, says Rod Regier, executive director of economic development for the City of Kitchener. Regier's one of those highly educated city planners with a diamond-encrusted CV and a passion for his job. No wonder he was invited to speak at the Brampton Downtown Development Corporation's (BDDC) annual general meeting at the Rose Theatre last month. Regier has been in charge of re-doing the downtown core of Kitchener for the past decade, and his slant on just how to fix the unfixable might help the BDDC create a Brampton template. Kitchener and Brampton share many of the same traits: both are land locked communities with deep, pre-Confederation roots. Their downtowns were rundown and tired looking – the products of an age when dirty industry was located in the core, and people walked from home to work. At one time, most Ontario towns were defined on foot, while horses connected the close network of settlements that once made up each region. And the brief early



Old and new Kitchener

20th-century moment of streetcars and rail suburbs gave us Manhattan. The post-war boom resulted in a shift to the suburbs and an almost universal addiction to the car. Today's cities, like Brampton and Kitchener, are dynamic economic engines that thrive on private initiative, trial and

error, incremental change, and human and economic diversity. The problem today is simple: we have forgotten what cities were really all about – gathering places for people, not thoroughfares for cars. How do you unlock the bottlenecks created by gas-guzzlers, and make cities not only livable but a catalyst for the new economy? Kitchener found a way. Regier's presentation must have filled a few BDDC members with envy. Many of Kitchener's old Victorian factories have been converted to chic, livable spaces. The Economic Development Investment Fund is priming its downtown strategic plan and has a heady \$110 million in the kitty. The fund began in 2004 and raised funds from a special 1.2 per cent increase on the levy tax. This fund has helped finance such downtown projects as the University of Waterloo School of Pharmacy, a glittering new facility that also houses the McMaster School of Medicine. A lovely Accelerator Centre is also driving brainy new, high-tech recruits into the core area, while a new upper storey residential and façade program is beautifying the entire area.

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Cities in 'bare knuckles fight' to attract talent

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A new downtown courthouse will serve the 70 to 80 law firms in the core, and the spill off effect on restaurant and bar owners in the downtown is incalculable.

This sits in stark contrast to the Davis Courthouse in Brampton which resides on its lonesome on the eastside of Highway 10 – far from the retailers in the downtown core. It's a reminder of the shortsightedness of planners at both the provincial and municipal level. What could have been a catalyst to downtown revival is wasted in the outskirts.

The courthouse's location still irks Neil Davis, a lawyer/partner at the Davis-Webb law firm situated downtown. Although his family's name is on the building (dedicated to his grandfather Grenville Davis), it sits as a reminder of an opportunity wasted.

"We've had no office building here in Brampton since 1992," said Davis, who invited Regier to the BDDC evening. "The lesson is: put public investment in the right place."

Regier says cities like Kitchener and Brampton are in a "bare-knuckles fight" to attract and retain talent.

Building a city that welcomes the new economy (life sciences, high-tech firms, etc.) and offers special features for those employed there, is the only way to survive against other cities trying to do the same thing.

It's the greatest challenge of the next generation of planners, he said.

Kitchener is more than meeting the challenge. The city actually grew during the recent recession, and high-tech firms like RIM, Agfa, Dalsa, Intel, Christie Digital, and Open Text have all made a commitment to its Communitech facility in the core. The city is quickly becoming a digital hub.

It's also tapping into the three universities (Waterloo, Wilfrid Laurier, and Guelph) and college (Conestoga) in the area, to further enhance its image as a centre of learning and a rich area for recruitment.

The results are startling: there's a huge increase in downtown office space, more events are being held in the core (Kitchener Blues Festival, to name one), a dramatic increase (40 per cent) in tax assessment, and more and more residents are moving downtown.

The next phase of the downtown strategic plan is to increase residential development, says Regier.

Brampton, on the other hand, is rich in residential development with seven, count 'em, seven major condo projects either completed or in the process. Another 4,000 people will soon populate the downtown core. But what will they find?

Some very tired buildings in serious need of repair, and a spotty grouping of retail outlets – and not one hotel to act as a focal point for activity.

Mayor Susan Fennell is encouraged that the new ZUM bus will soon be traveling through the downtown and an all-day GO Train service is also on the way.

She thinks the city's commitment of \$60 million to a potential re-do of the old Peel Memorial Hospital lands, will act as a catalyst to change the core into a vibrant people place.

She thinks Brampton has one thing going for it that other suburban communities in the 905 areas do not: "We protected our downtown," she said.

Fennell is currently in negotiations to try and bring a major hotel/convention centre to the core.

But how far behind are we in the game? Fennell was at a recent meeting of mayors in Moncton, New Brunswick, and was struck that the city sports five major downtown hotels.

Not bad for a city that has a rather tiny population base of less than 100,000.

Fennell, like Regier, is a big fan of creating a city that houses the "jobs of tomorrow."

She said Brampton is done with allowing more truck and logistics terminals that eat up a lot of greenfield land and don't provide the number, or the kind of jobs needed in the future.

"We want to use the employment lands (4,000 acres that are fully serviced) to attract the jobs of tomorrow," she said.

Fennell added that the BDDC is the perfect "toolbox" to help Brampton rebuild its downtown.

Kitchener has witnessed a major reconstruction of King Street, the main thoroughfare.

The massive rebuild made many of the



Rod Regier (left) of Kitchener's Economic Development Office, along with Karen Campbell and Don Naylor of the BDDC. Regier was in Brampton last month to address the BDDC at its Annual General Meeting. Photo by Peter McCusker

downtown retailers angry for quite a while, said Regier, and the entire process "was not very pleasant."

But the final results are eye fetching.

A unique flexible street design allows space to be made available for parking or patios. The façade program has dramatically changed the look of the buildings in the core, and the vacancy rates downtown continues to tumble down, from 14 to around 7 per cent.

Regier said the battle to clean up the downtown is "not for the faint of heart," but the results are the kind that Brampton can only dream about. Kitchener has saved its Victorian past and reworked it into an eclectic mix that has created a truly unique downtown core.

The old factories that once sat as eyesores in the core have really been a godsend to the city, said Regier. Many have now been spiffed up and modernized – most by private-sector partners.

The Kitchener market is a going concern year round, and even Victoria Park, once an old discarded brownfield site, is an oasis of downtown greenery.

Factories that once sat idle have sprung back to life as lofts for downtown residents.

The old 450,000 square foot Tannery building one of the city's symbols of beauty.

Yes, Rome wasn't built in a day, and Regier knows that patience has to be at the core of

any plan to reawaken a city's core.

"You have to think way beyond a single electoral term [if you want to commit to renewal]," he told the BDDC crowd. "You have to live with it for awhile."

The BDDC Board of Directors was announced at the AGM and includes, Private Sector Directors: Don Naylor, Don Naylor & Associates Landscape Architect (Chair), David Harmsworth, Harmsworth Decorating Centre (Vice Chair), Neil Davis, Davis Webb LLP (Secretary), Scott Goodison, Goodison Insurance & Financial Services, Gregory Schwarze, We Love Tennis, and Sean Trueland, BMO Nesbitt Burns. City of

Brampton Directors: Regional Councillor Grant Gibson, Regional Councillor Elaine Moore, and Regional Councillor John Sanderson.

The BDDC also handed out its 2010 Recognition Awards (see below):

Legacy Award, Richard Prouse, Prouse Dash Crouch LLP; Business Investment Awards: Mellennia Institute of Aesthetics Inc., Valentine Spa, Sushi House, and Cyclepath Brampton. Community Volunteer Award: Bob Posliff. Community Partner Award: Brampton Arts Council, Peel Regional Police, and Doug Vivian, City of Brampton.



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