

O. Maximizing Growth in Built Areas

Authored by the Greater Peterborough Chamber of Commerce Co-sponsored by the Kawartha Chamber of Commerce and Tourism, Brantford-Brant Chamber of Commerce

Issue

In many Ontario communities, historic downtowns are a source of pride and joy. However, these downtown buildings often leave unused space on the table. This resolution offers a potential solution to help property owners, municipalities, and the province to maximize the use of 2nd and 3rd floor spaces on Main Street, Ontario.

Background

There is potential that there will be no complete agreement on how to accomplish this goal as many of the buildings are in private ownership. That said, the ability of the municipality and an owner to understand the full scope of a renovation or upgrading required of a building is imperative as cost, or the potential not to see a return on investment is high.

In the Places to Grow Act, there is great focus on density requirements. For a downtown such as Peterborough the requirement is 150 residents per hectare. Yet with older, sometimes heritage-designated, buildings in Ontario downtowns there are constant challenges to realizing redevelopment and infill of these spaces.

The Community Improvement Plans provide an incentive framework to address some of these concerns, however in many cases these programs tend to be overextended or see limited uptake because costs of renovations can easily outpace the incentive. Many communities have façade improvement programs, brownfields tax assistance programs, energy efficiency programs and, in Peterborough, there is even a Residential Conversion and Intensification Grant Program that provides property owners with a grant of \$10/square foot renovated as part of a Community Improvement Plan.

These programs do not adequately address the challenges most commonly faced by businesses in these core areas which are regulatory requirements that are substantially higher than when the buildings were first constructed. Ontario's Building Code, the Fire Code, the Ministry of the Environment, and the Municipal by-laws tend to make the costs of restoration exorbitant for most businesses. Many businesses do not even seek advice for fear of having their buildings closed unless costly upgrades are made to meet these requirements.

Creative approaches require architects, engineers, planners, and municipal officials to work with businesses to derive viable solutions for redevelopment. This is not something that should be done on a piecemeal basis but as an extensive program that involves systematic analysis of the key challenges and a targeted response from each municipality.

The benefits of upgrading or development of these types of units are numerous, in that, they could be used for commercial space, high end or affordable housing, help infill urban areas and become economic catalysts for continued development. The challenge is encouraging development that is not punitive on property owners, but results in buildings that are safe and occupied.

In the provincial Fall Economic Statement, the government announced a Main Streets program to potentially assist with façade improvements and digitization of central urban areas. \$40 million was set aside for this venture to “help strengthen communities’ promotional, planning and implementation activities, as well as providing direct business support for capital improvements, enhanced digital capabilities and improvements to energy efficiencies.” While welcomed, there is a missed opportunity to use the allotted funds to truly understand the cost of renovating older buildings in a downtown core as well as the impact of having a significant amount of square footage be unoccupied. In order to strengthen our built areas there needs to be a good understanding of the current infrastructure needs and capabilities.

As such, this resolution proposes that the Main Streets Fund be used for a pilot project that allows private building owners and municipal officials to assess, without punitive action, the needs of a building or series of buildings in a downtown core.

Recommendations

The Ontario Chamber of Commerce urges the Government of Ontario to:

1. Designate the Main Streets Fund to be used to for a pilot project that allows private building owners and municipal officials to study and assess, using an independent consultant and without punitive action, the needs of a building or series of buildings in a downtown core.
2. Allow for a renovation plan or commitment to be worked out that is agreeable to the property owner and the municipality.
3. Allow for a balanced approach to intensification and heritage preservation that takes into consideration a community’s current building stock and its ability to function in a contemporary economy.
4. Allow for intensification districts just outside the core, but within the designated built up area that can be developed in tandem with the Urban Growth Area and not impact the current intensification numbers.
5. Study the effect of the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act has on the viability of the intensification projects of existing buildings.

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Sunset Date: April 28, 2021