

Carleton Place BIA

Towards a Vibrant Downtown Core

A Strategy and Plan of Action for Retail Recruitment within the BIA Area

The recent decline of retail businesses within the BIA area is the cause for concern for the BIA Board. Working within its own resources the Board proposes a strategy and action plan to move to full occupancy of the downtown core and the branding of Carleton Place as a shopping destination within the Ottawa valley.

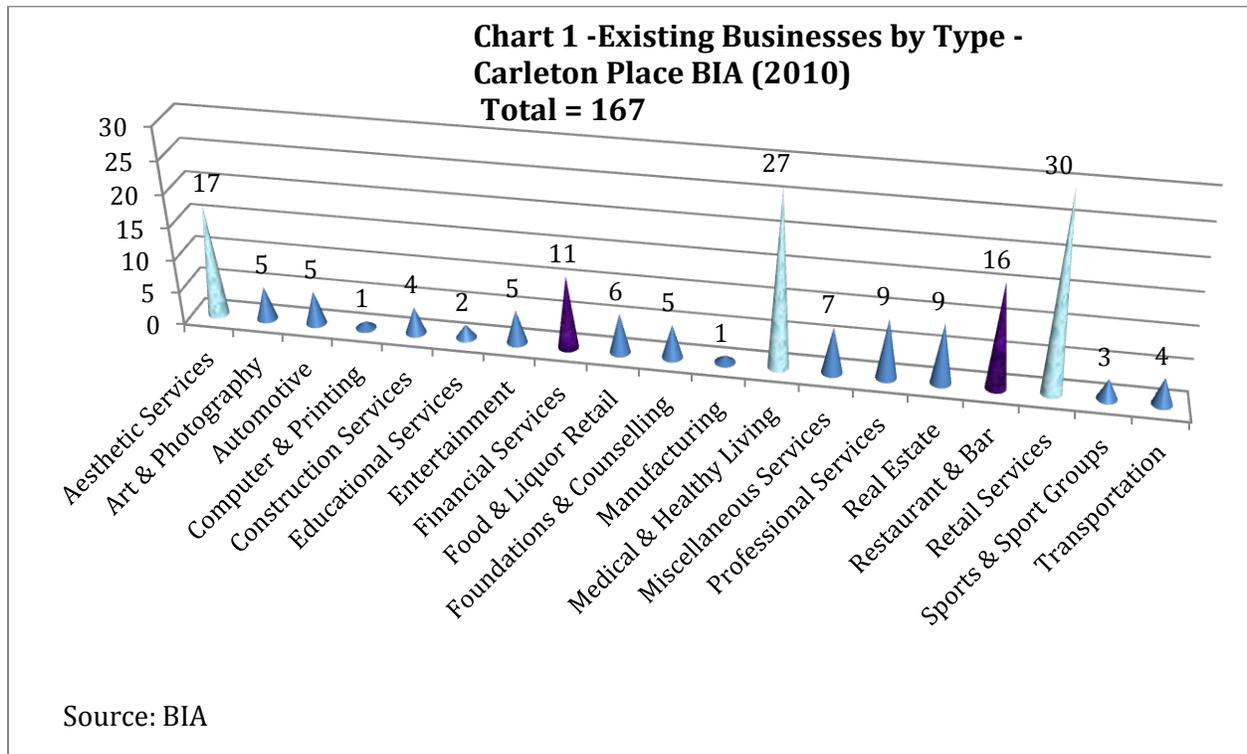
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Introduction

Over the past decade Carleton Place has seen impressive growth in population and business recruitment. With the widening of the 417 Highway, the town more than ever serves as a bedroom community to the large metropolitan area of Ottawa.

This growth has occurred in the southern part of town, particularly in the McNeely Avenue/Highway 7 area where large retail stores abound. This, in turn has resulted in new housing being concentrated along McNeely Avenue where quick access to Hwy 7/417 is a feature.

While new residential and commercial development is good for the Town of Carleton Place as a whole, the benefits have not translated evenly throughout the town. The once vibrant downtown has seen the closure of many businesses over the past five years due in part to the growth surrounding the McNeely Avenue/Hwy 7 intersection. The Bridge Street BIA service area is struggling to regain lost momentum and to rekindle interest in retail shopping. On Bridge Street alone some XX stores or YY% of the total sit vacant as business owners have had to close their doors.



While it would be easy to point to the surge in growth in the Town's South end as the cause for the current situation, this would be neither fair nor accurate. The phenomenon of a decaying downtown core is common throughout Ontario and indeed, Canada. At a recent national conference of Business Improvement Associations, this was a theme repeated in small towns with populations of only a few thousand to large cities such as London, Ontario.

The Board of Management of the BIA has considered this situation carefully and feels that some direct action must be taken to stem the emptying of the downtown. Direct action consisting of a longer term strategy to reverse or at least to halt the negative trend is the purpose of this paper.

What Other Communities are Doing

It is important to note the need for retail recruitment is universal among downtowns across the province. The standard response by communities who have seen success in developing their downtowns is to engage an Economic Development Officer, or a Downtown Retail Recruiter. In some cases teams have been established to support the professional staff by using members BIA's and Chamber of Commerce.

Objectives of a Retail Recruitment Strategy and Action Plan

Small towns are measured by their charm and history. Thousands of trips are made by individuals and families to explore the many towns and villages throughout Eastern Ontario. A cornerstone of the character of a rural town is the quaintness and character of its downtown area. A mix of retail stores that blends historical and modern shops and services marks a town as a destination that will bring shoppers back time after time because they are being something not offered in the cities.

Getting this mix right is very difficult. We are proposing that a vision of what might be an ideal mix be developed and measures be taken to achieve this vision as near as possible. The vision cannot be rigid or prescriptive since business owners and landlords are free to make whatever arrangements they deem to be in their best interests to fill vacancies. It is noted that for some time there has been a trend towards having more ground floor space occupied by service businesses not normally considered as retail. Of the 167 businesses within the BIA database in 2010 some 66 or 40% are not traditional retail businesses. That is not to say that these businesses are in any way less important than "traditional" retail establishments but they do affect how the downtown core is perceived by out-of-town shoppers. A shortage of storefronts offering the goods and services typically seen as "retail" may suggest that the town is indifferent to out-of-town business.

The approach that we are taking is to sketch out what a "best case" mix of retail might be and, using the tools and resources at our disposal, endeavour to recruit the type of businesses that best fit the ideal. Tools include suasion, targeting, use of incentives, networking, promotion and planning.

Of the 20 vacant storefronts within the BIA our goal will be to fill 33% of them each year for three years, adjusting to include any vacancies that may arise during this period.

Benefits of Action

A vibrant downtown will help shape the identity of Carleton Place and will add excitement and wealth to the residents and to the town. New businesses mean new revenues for the town and for other businesses and form the basis for others to want to locate here.

If we can reverse the emptying of the downtown that we have witnessed in recent years we will be able to take full advantage of the new modern road links to Ottawa and to other rural communities and make Carleton Place a cornerstone destination in the region. The success of our downtown events such as the Christmas and Halloween Parades, the Bridge Street Bazaar, Lambs Down Park Festival to name a few, has demonstrated that people from throughout the region love visiting our town. The new Farmer's Market Pavilion slated for construction within the next two years will reinforce the rural heritage of the town and help draw people to our community.

Plan of Action for Retail Recruitment within the Carleton Place BIA Area

The Plan of Action we are proposing is a detailed set of steps and processes intended to produce the intended result of a reinvigorated downtown shopping area. It has two main components – Team and Tool Building, to put together a work team that will search out necessary information; and Market the Downtown, a set of steps that will put the plan into action.

Team and Tool Development

1. Form retail recruitment team
2. Strike a budget for retail recruitment.
3. Set deadlines for all tasks associated with the retail recruitment process.
4. Establish a complete listing of empty retail space and have it posted on the web site. What is for rent and what is for sale.
5. Develop an inventory of property owners who own locations with vacant space.
6. Coordinate a meeting with vacant space property owners.
7. Develop meaningful opportunities for business start-ups. For example; an incubator program, façade improvement.
8. Develop a list of businesses that would be expected to succeed in Downtown Carleton Place. Identify complimentary businesses and business clusters.
9. Seek out information on grant opportunities for small businesses.
10. Create a package to assist individuals starting a new business with information about the town, important contact numbers, telephone book, how to register your business in Ontario.

Market the Downtown

1. Establish a unified form of advertising with property owners with financial support from the BIA.
2. Develop a communication system with all community real estate, and work closely to ensure a high level of communication is established between real estate and BIA regarding vacant spaces and opportunities for sale.
3. Revise the existing “downtowncarletonplace.com” web site, add features that are specifically identified as retail recruitment.
4. Create a downtown fact base for the web site.
5. Prepare a retail recruitment package with facts about the downtown as well as the town, including items such as demographics, average family income, event details etc.
6. Establish a marketing and promotion plan that may include trade shows, searching out specific print publications geared towards start-up businesses. In an attempt to recruit established businesses to set up a second business, the marketing and promotions should be done within a 100 mile radius.

Resource Implications

To the extent possible we will use the time and expertise of the BIA Board members to develop the Retail Recruitment Strategy and Action Plan with the support of the BIA Executive Director. We have some uncommitted funds within the Marketing and Promotion envelope that can be applied towards design, printing and distribution of printed material. An amount of \$10,000 will be set aside to cover these direct costs.

Eventually, we would like to work more closely with the Town Government to better integrate what we are doing with the Town’s general goals of economic development. The synergistic effects of merging the BIA and the Town’s goals for revitalization of the downtown core can produce better results in a shorter time frame. We recognize that it is the goal of the local government to hire an Economic Development Officer and the BIA fully supports this initiative. We feel however that action is needed immediately to focus on the acute deterioration of the downtown core.

Conclusion

The BIA Board feels that it must act now to effect a reversal in the current trend of emptying the downtown business core. We are committed to developing a strategy and action plan to increase retail business recruitment within the BIA area. The approach is measured and reasonable and can be implemented within current BIA resources.

We hope that, through this initiative, the BIA can help their current membership who have to shoulder a greater burden given the growing number of shuttered storefronts. We believe that this initiative can also help the Town government by recruiting new businesses to Carleton Place that can change, in a positive way, the image of the town and make it a shopping destination.

