

## **We should appreciate the planned transformation of Guelph's downtown**

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Downtown Guelph is transforming.

For years, the city, downtown businesses and citizens wrung their hands about downtown Guelph. How to fix the problems? How to make a small city downtown thrive?

After languishing so long, the downtown is on a new, exciting path, full of promise, some potential pitfalls and controversy. Most of the dramatic changes and proposals are positive; in other cases, the jury is still out.

The public seldom hears the full breadth of the vision for downtown renewal. They hear about hot topics that create controversy. Only an informed and inspired public can ensure the transformation is successful and benefits the entire city. Much can still go awry.

Many big projects have already transformed parts of downtown: the new railway bridge over Wyndham Street, city hall, Market Square, the new museum, Guelph Central Station, trails, and redesign of Norfolk and Gordon Streets. These give us an exciting preview of what a more vibrant downtown would be like.

More projects are planned, such as the St. George's Square makeover and the Wilson and Baker Street parking facilities. Private sector projects such as the Gummer Building, the Market Commons, the revamp of the Diplomat Hotel, and the controversial Tricar 18-storey condominium building will help transform by adding businesses and about 200 housing units — the first new housing in 20 years downtown, according to Ian Panabaker, the city's manager of downtown renewal.

Stakeholders are mostly positive about the overall direction being taken. Marty Williams, of the downtown business association, and Dave Sills, of the Guelph Civic League, both expressed support for the overall direction, while taking issue with the city's direction on some specific topics such as parking and highrise development.

But there have been missteps, too. The proposed new main library was not built, but land purchases were made for it that undermine businesses at the north end of Wyndham Street. And there was the unfortunate impact that Carden Street reconstruction had on businesses. Now, we see emerging negative impacts on businesses from moving city buses from St. George's Square to Guelph Central Station. Panabaker says lessons have been learned about how to manage the impacts of change better. Downtown businesses expect better.

A fresh, new future direction has also been set for our downtown, reflecting more than a decade of public discussion, Mayor Karen Farbridge emphasized in a conversation.

The downtown secondary plan boldly sets new directions, including increased numbers of people at higher densities, notably contentious highrise developments. New residences on the former W.C. Woods factory lands will also bring more people to live downtown.

Increasing density and compact design are a big driver for downtown renewal, Farbridge noted. A new park along the Speed River and Wellington Street replacing the plaza would add much needed green space in the longer term, but also affect businesses. Sills, of the Civic League, believes highrise development undermines the downtown's character, and low-rise buildings are more appropriate.

Parking remains a contentious issue, and improved parking is a key to the success of new residences and businesses. The Wilson and Baker streets parking structures are unfunded and on hold pending a parking strategy. Some hold a naive, utopian ideal that we should all walk or bike everywhere. But real people and communities use cars, transit, bikes and, yes, walking. While we can evolve our travel methods, accommodation of all modes, including cars, will be pivotal to the success of everything else done downtown. Parking is a defining issue for the future of downtown renewal, along with the height and design of new development.

Current urban planning dogma, based mostly in very large cities, emphasizes density and public transit. But smaller cities are different — size matters — and need different approaches. Guelph must emulate places like Kingston, Ann Arbor, Mich., and Madison, Wis., not Toronto, Chicago and Miami.

Downtown Guelph is on the move, but the momentum is still tentative and could be undermined by lack of commitment. The next municipal election could be a game changer.

Sustaining momentum toward a renewed downtown will enrich the whole city.

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<http://www.guelphmercury.com/opinion-story/2784146-we-should-appreciate-the-planned-transformation-of-guelph-s-downtown/>