

HOW SHOULD DOWNTOWN GUELPH INCREASE PEDESTRIAN SPACE?



PAUL SMITH
Column

Is Guelph more like Kalamazoo or Copenhagen? Huh? Some people want a car-free downtown and think seasonal patios and dining district are the first steps in that direction. But is a car-free downtown a good idea or not? We can learn from Kalamazoo and Copenhagen. More on that later.

Guelph spent years developing the downtown secondary plan and street redesign with great minds working and extensive consultation. The plan won awards. Some parts have been implemented with great success, but it seems stalled.

The plan also includes greater pedestrian space throughout downtown Guelph including on Wyndham and MacDonnell Streets. Why are we not talking about that grander vision instead of just about the one-off, COVID-inspired dining district?

We need more human-scale pedestrian space downtown, wider sidewalks, mews, lower speed limits and narrower automobile lanes. It will be transformative. Advocates for a car-free downtown mean well in wanting to reduce the dominance of automobiles. But more pedestrian space does not have to mean a car-free downtown or blocking major intersections. Reducing the dominance of cars and increasing pedestrian spaces while still accommodating cars is the proven model for successful urban revitalization. Kitchener and Waterloo downtowns, Granville

Island in Vancouver, the Forks in Winnipeg are all examples of success. None are car-free.

Mayor Guthrie advocates a pragmatic approach to have increased pedestrian space and more amenities, arts, and music to attract people downtown in the warmer months. He says he would like to find opportunities for some car-free areas downtown for limited, flexible periods where warranted.

A car-free downtown Guelph is neither possible, nor desirable. Kalamazoo is the poster child for the failure of car-free pedestrian areas in North America. Copenhagen on the contrary is the poster child for pedestrianization and illustrates the factors needed for successful car-free areas, most of which Guelph does not have. Dr. Kelly Gregg, an expert in pedestrianization, says "the idea of directly replicating European mod-

els of pedestrianization in the contemporary North American context is flawed."

So honestly, is Guelph more like Kalamazoo or Copenhagen?

The downtown secondary plan will increase pedestrian spaces on MacDonnell and Wyndham Streets by widening sidewalks, narrowing traffic lanes and reconfiguring parking. Why not test that out on a temporary basis, rather than disrupting city life by closing a major intersection for half the year? Testing the design could help figure out what works and doesn't, and we'd all get a chance to have an opinion actually informed by evidence.

Downtown revitalization requires a lot more than increased pedestrian spaces. It isn't all about restaurants. Marty Williams of the Downtown Guelph Business association is concerned about employment



Royal Electric Bar & Public Eatery photo

"We need more human-scale pedestrian space downtown, wider sidewalks, mews, lower speed limits and narrower automobile lanes," writes Paul Smith.

downtown. Before COVID there were 8,000 jobs downtown, mainly office and service sector. Will those all return? Lots of new higher density residential development is either built or on the way, like the Metalworks. More emphasis is needed on nurturing a wide variety of successful businesses; that is what attracts and employs people downtown.

Clearly, Guelph citizens want a prosperous, more pedestrian-focused downtown, but the city is moving slowly on the obvious, already prepared plan. Let's

build on the successes of Market Square, Guelph Central Station, the public art project and the potential of the Baker Street redevelopment. This will be good for business, a vibrant downtown, the environment, and all of Kalamazoo, oh I mean Guelph.

Paul Smith is a Guelph freelance writer, environmental planner, and a past member of the City of Guelph's Downtown Advisory Committee and Environmental Advisory Committee.

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Pre Covid picture

The Government of Canada is supporting seniors in our community through New Horizon's Funding, Canada Summer Jobs and emergency community funding to the United Way of Guelph Wellington, the Guelph Community Foundation and the Safe Restart Program to help local groups support seniors:

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