

Sign By-Law Briefing

Presented by: Kithio Mwanzia, Policy Coordinator

St. Catharines-Thorold Chamber of Commerce

Introduction

City council and citizens have identified Downtown St. Catharines as a priority for revitalization. Through extensive research, the Economic Development and Tourism Services has designed elements of a plan to enhance the downtown for both residential and tourism opportunities. A central component of the tourism/consumer plan is the development of the wine route through St. Paul St. In advance of the completion of the project – slated for 2009 - the St. Catharines – Thorold Chamber of Commerce is committed to working with our membership, and the city, to ensure that downtown St. Catharines will be market ready for the influx of tourists.

The downtown business district is composed of a diverse collection of businesses and services - all of which have established various ways of creating profile for their business through the use of signage. A review of the signage treatment in the downtown indicated a broad range of signs – ranging from professional and artistic to amateurish and garish. The widely varying sizes, design and colours of signage led the Chamber to review the current by-laws governing signs in the downtown core.

Signage in the downtown differs in many respects from number of signs to location and construction of signs, but there is one recurring theme and that is a design philosophy that is sympathetic to the general character of the street and the surrounding businesses. However there have been multiple identified instances of inappropriate signage. Whatever signage a business chooses is not only the first line of communication for the business, but also – and more importantly - it is the first line of communication to a tourist/consumer. Therefore, it is important, in order to develop a downtown that is market ready for an increase in tourism traffic, a properly defined set of signage regulations are enacted and enforced that capture the opportunities presented by the wine route. It is the Chamber's opinion that signage and proper enforcement of signage regulations are critical in achieving this goal.

Therefore, it is critical that the city work with businesses and the Downtown Association to review current regulations and update the signs by-law as required to ensure that existing and future signs will reflect the image of a downtown that is a tourist destination. In addition, ensure that sign violations are dealt with swiftly.

Concerns

1. The Sign By-Law is not being adequately enforced and, as a result, the facade of the downtown has been damaged, with a potential to deter tourist traffic and business investment. As a result there is a net retrogression in monies earned by businesses and the City of St. Catharines and the downtown area is far from meeting its potential.
2. The objective '*improve cleanliness*' contained within the Community Vision Committee Report will not be achieved. The action item as stated in the document calls for stricter property standards enforcement, facade improvements and clean city/clean Downtown programs.¹ The lack of enforcement of the Sign By-Law has moved the City further away from achieving this objective.

¹ St. Catharines Community Vision Committee, *Strategic Plan Report* "Stimulate and value a vibrant Downtown core....the heart of our city" pg 31

Recommendations

1. While the St. Catharines – Thorold Chamber of Commerce recognizes the rigorous approval process for signage that the City of St. Catharines has established, it is important to review the signage by-law in light of the emergence of downtown St. Catharines as a tourist destination and possibly modify said by-laws to reflect future trends.
2. In addition, once signage approvals have been granted that there is regular monitoring and enforcement.
3. The City of St. Catharines should work with the Downtown Association to monitor all signage in the downtown; subsequently the City must be expediently responsive to reports of Sign By-Law violations from the Downtown Association.
4. The City of St. Catharines should develop a long term monitoring strategy and review process that includes the Downtown Association as a vital component of this process. The Downtown Association is a critical stakeholder in that it is able to articulate the interests of Downtown businesses and ensure that whatever long term strategy that is developed does not negatively impact the downtown businesses community.
5. The City of St. Catharines and the Downtown Association should review every five years the monitoring strategy, design philosophy and existing regulation to ensure that they are compatible with existing trends.