



Romance and Reality – A Downtown Perspective - Submission to “Speak Up Sudbury” Master Plan

Submitted by John Lindsay, Chair, Friendly to Seniors – Sudbury on behalf of the organization.

Those who have lived in Sudbury long enough and are old enough, fondly recall the downtown that used to be prior to the exodus of many office workers, service providers and major retail establishments to various other locations throughout the city. Many remember the days; now long past, of crowded and busy streets and the sense of being part of a big city, almost like a Toronto of the North. Looking back, these times were seen as almost romantic in the sense that we loved how dynamic and alive it felt to be part of what we considered the biggest and best city in Northern Ontario and proud to be the Nickel capital of the World, an expression now seldom heard.

Those days are gone and in reality will never return. Downtowns everywhere, like Sudbury, have suffered the “perfect storm” of having to compete with new commercial and retail development elsewhere with almost no increase in downtown residential population.

However, considering the expansion and development of shopping malls and big box store complexes and the movement of offices and businesses to other locations our downtown has not experienced the same decline as many other cities. Although there is considerable surplus office space available, few storefronts are boarded up, like in other downtowns, and most businesses, old and new, continue to serve the community.

The city and downtown merchants, individually and through their associations, have worked diligently over the years to try to improve the downtown, to restore, even in some measure, its former glory. These endeavors have met with debatable success. Our organization has conducted surveys and focus groups with older adults to determine their feelings and thoughts with respect to downtown and our findings have been duly reported.

To summarize, older adults, a large and significant segment of our population, are no different than other citizens and respond to what we describe as the Three “Cs” – Convenience, Cost and Content. There has to be convenient access, cost must be reasonable and there must be something of value (content) whether a store, service, restaurant or event. Everything else is window dressing. The reason most seniors, except those few within walking distance, and only 5 percent use public transit, do not come downtown except when they need to for business, health purposes, occasionally to shop, or to go to a restaurant at night, and perhaps the market in the summertime, is very simple - they can satisfy these three “Cs” elsewhere, places where they can get to conveniently, with no parking cost and can have most of their needs and/or wants satisfied. Many say that when they do come downtown they have to contend with dirty streets in good weather, snow banks in the winter and panhandlers at all times of the year, not to mention limited pay for parking spots and fewer shopping opportunities than elsewhere.

It is interesting to note that the new master plan calls for creation of 300 more parking spaces but only 100 more than those being taken away by the new school of Architecture and at a significant projected cost, both to develop and for use. As well, most of these new parking spots will be at a considerably greater distance from the downtown merchant and service core. The same applies to the proposed relocation of the bus terminal. These proposals would seem to run counter to one of the most important of the three “Cs”, convenience, and of course the second “C”, cost, which is a major concern to the older taxpayer, as indeed it should to all ratepayers in the city. The same applies to plans for road realignments and beautification projects, which while interesting concepts, will do little to satisfy the three “Cs”. We think that, quite simply, all involved should work with what we have now and do everything possible to make use of the vacant office space downtown for whatever productive use possible including residential development that will increase the downtown population for maximum economic benefit.

One of the main thrusts of the new master plan is for more institutional buildings that will, by their presence, serve to “revitalize” the downtown. Several of the proposed facilities are “destination locations” which like our present downtown Sudbury Arena may attract significant numbers but for limited periods of time. Peripheral benefits are few, compared to those that could be realistically expected by the creation of downtown housing where residents are much more likely to respond to the three “Cs” – convenience, cost and content, simply because of their location, already downtown, to utilize local shops, services and restaurants etc.

We live in a very large and diverse city. Our seniors are concerned that perhaps undue emphasis is being placed on just one particular portion which has limited value to many of our residents who may go for extended periods without ever visiting downtown, for whatever purpose, except perhaps for those already mentioned. Many of these same individuals believe that it is not the role of the city to continue to attempt through “master plans” to restore the former romantic downtown city past, but to deal more realistically and cost effectively with what now exists. The example of the restoration of a former grocery store to the new Steelworkers Hall with large community rooms and free parking is an example of how existing resources, even outside of the downtown, can be developed and put to good use for our entire community satisfying the three “C” considerations of convenience, cost and content.

It is no secret that we are in a period of economic restraint and funding for large scale projects such as envisioned in the new master plan will be severely limited for some time into the future. Expenditures by our community that will put additional burden on our senior taxpayers, many whom are dependant on limited income, would not be prudent or appreciated at this time. Therefore it is urged that the utmost degree of realism and creative cost effective measures be applied in deliberations with respect to all aspects of this plan for the future of downtown and indeed all of the City of Greater Sudbury.

Respectfully submitted

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