

The Downtown Vision

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If you haven't already stumbled upon it, consider checking out the Grey Bruce Image Archives Facebook page. It's a fantastic resource of historical photographs and has a killer way of inspiring discussion and memory-laden chatter in the comment section. The downtown core of Owen Sound is featured frequently, and its bustling economy is both awe-inspiring, and perplexing. Whenever I see a shot of a jam-packed city street accented by thriving businesses, Model T's, and a few horse and buggies, I'm left thinking, 'man, downtown doesn't quite look like that these days.'

Economy is inevitably linked to many complex themes: population, socio-economic circumstance, geography, culture, politics, and bureaucracy to name a few. When one or two of these pillars of economy crumbles, so does the historical record of such impressive archival photographs. Here's the thing, and I've said it again, and again - there's always *one* thing that doesn't waver here, and that's a love for this place and all of its quirks. I'm going to keep saying that, too; *love*, however you want to interpret that word, is quite frankly the key in helping our City rebound from just about anything. Hard times, prejudice, a proverbial bump in the road, and economic tragedy included.

Cue Waleed Aslam Shaikh. He may not have grown up here, but the love this guy has for the City of Owen Sound is palpable. In just two years of calling this place home, Waleed has cemented himself as a positivity-driven people's champ with one hell of a resume to back it up.

"I sat on the tourism advisory committee down in the City of Hamilton for a number of years. The committee oversaw what I think is one of the most ambitious tourism and waterfront development initiatives in southern Ontario. I also sat on the Immigrant and Refugee Advisory Committee, and this committee worked extensively to assist immigrants and refugees that had settled in the city's core," says Waleed. "I was a member of the Hamilton Youth Action Committee as well, this committee reported to council on various youth initiatives."

Up north in Owen Sound, Waleed was appointed to the City of Owen Sound Community Services Committee that works exclusively on matters pertaining to planning and heritage. He also serves as a director on the Four County Labour Market Planning Board serving the counties of Grey, Bruce, Perth and Huron. He's a Director with Welcoming Communities Grey and Bruce that works to welcome and assist newcomers and migrants in our area, and finally, as if that wasn't enough, is a member of the Georgian Bay Folk Society. But perhaps one of the biggest accomplishments he's made here is being appointed by the DIA as Board Member of the Owen Sound Downtown Improvement Area, an organization formed by downtown



merchants in 1973. The OSDIA is committed to developing a vibrant, visitor friendly downtown core to attract and retain business in downtown Owen Sound.

“The foot traffic is just not there [this year],” says Waleed over the phone. “Being conscious I don’t speak on behalf of the OSDIA, what I can say is some of our merchants downtown are having a very hard time making ends meet... It’s tough. What we’re trying to do is support as much as we can, day in, and day out... As of now, the majority of the conversation that’s been there is how to support existing businesses that are there... We’re confused, I guess a lot of us are. How do you navigate this crisis we’re in while keeping an eye on the future? It’s a very challenging task.”

So, where do we start? Covid-19 is a worthy adversary, and like all great strategic minds, the OSDIA is looking both within, and elsewhere to investigate what has worked here and in other communities. For one, so history doesn’t repeat itself, and two, as an advantageous way of looking at the broader scope of what’s possible.



I spoke with OSDIA Vice-chair and Bare Birch co-owner, Jacqueline Furtner, to gauge the hurdles and deciding factors that have helped inform Covid-19 reopening guidelines as Stage 3 loosen the stranglehold of the local economy.

“We aren’t in this alone. We depend on each other’s success,” says Furtner. “The DIA has been working on a rebranding initiative for the downtown and one of the main aspects of this

will be building more connections amongst business owners and staff so we can create a better atmosphere as a whole. With the five-hour free parking now available downtown in downtown parking lots, there is more opportunity to park and wander.”

She says through various channels and actions, local businesses and their patrons are supporting each other by taking to social media to leave positive reviews of their favourite businesses or sharing posts. Some are purchasing gift certificates online to use at a later date, some purchase online for curbside delivery. “Now that we are able to be open again, people tell me they are happy to be out and feeling some sense of normalcy by just going into a store. It feels good to be back and we’re so lucky to have such great customers!”

Waleed shared a similar outlook, citing a three-pronged approach to revitalizing the downtown core; namely re-investigating the roles of commercial, tourism, and residential opportunities. And the pitchfork, so to speak, can’t be held by someone *only* looking to the future. What’s going to help OS out of this current crisis, is giving these tools to the people on the ground.

From speaking with local business owners lately, something Waleed notices we need more of, is inter-business collaboration. You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours. The *challenge* has been, and will always be, communication. The *solution* has been, and will always be circling back and finding common ground; we all love this place. Remember that. When your neighbour does well, you do well. When your competitors do well, remember birds of a feather flock together. Key to this City's downtown success will be knocking on doors, talking to one another, and supporting the folks who surround us.

Furtner adds our strength in Owen Sound remains an unbreakable resolve and an outpouring of community support - beginning with the creation of BOOST, Businesses and organizations of Owen Sound Together, a few years ago.

"The DIA holds an annual party for business owners and staff to get together and mingle so we can build connections and work together. It has always been a very well attended event. A few years ago, Camille Cole from Pretty Woman's Shoes and Swirls organized a group of businesses to get together to put on the First Friday events which have since become DIA events... It was a great initiative to get businesses connected and we still connect with each other for support and ideas."

In the meantime, Furtner says the OSDIA has been promoting the Digital Mainstreet program and sending all application information to its membership. This grant allows businesses to access funding for online training and software. "Being online has never been more important than right now and we want each of our members to have the opportunity to make it possible for their business," says Furtner.

"This is me being honest," says Waleed. "I come at it from a different town, been here for two years - people are like 'what the hell, why are you so into this?' It's because I'm obsessed with this community. I see the potential here. I see what it can be and the path we can hike down... We're the gateway to cottage country... Coming in from Hamilton and seeing how it turned itself around from the whole Steel City debacle and the demise of the steel industry, we kind of lost our identity there for a bit. Now you see these touristy coffee shops, skating rinks, the revitalization of the waterfront, people enjoying the patio - that's the vision I have for this City."

