

Business Times



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Dynamic Downtown!

'City building' will redefine Cambridge



By JAN DEAN

There are entire generations who have never gone downtown for an afternoon or evening. Oh they've probably gone downtown Toronto where the sidewalks are busy with walkers and strolling can take you to shopping, dining, and a variety of entertainment venues while you indulge in some people-watching. But enjoying your own city's downtown? Forget it. All that may change for Cambridge. A city blessed or cursed (depending on

your point of view) with three downtown areas: Hespeler, Preston, and Galt.

Something's happening. Just look at downtown Galt.

Where the new city hall is located. Where the University of Waterloo School of Architecture took up residence a few years ago, and where the new theatre for Drayton Valley Entertainment is going to be built. The Downtown Cambridge Business Improvement Association has applied for a \$750,000 grant for streetscaping that will see water and sewer lines replaced under the main streets, and improvements made above ground as well.

Spending public money to rejuvenate a downtown is par for the course. Look at Uptown Waterloo, Downtown Kitchener. Sometimes it works.

But public money alone can't do it all. You need a buy-in from the private sector.

You need someone like David Gibson of Perimeter Development Corporation.

A man who sees his plans for the seven properties he owns in the Galt downtown as an opportunity for 'city-building'.

Gibson says that several years ago he was approached by a local realtor to buy one building in downtown Galt and he said it wasn't enough. "You need critical mass to make a difference," explains Gibson, "that means several buildings."

Which is why he opted to buy seven buildings in downtown Cambridge and focus

on redeveloping that one block.

He says he knew going in it would take several years – most things do that matter.

It's not as if he's new to the process either. He was very involved with the redevelopment of Waterloo Square, tearing down half of the old mall to rejuvenate Uptown Waterloo.

He says that he loves redevelopment projects and seeing the change happen over time.

After all, downtown is a great alternative to a mall and he believes many people would prefer to shop in an open-air venue rather than a closed mall.

He says that as malls got more popular, their success essentially gutted many downtowns as merchants either closed shop or moved to the malls. "Some areas fell on hard times," he says, hard times that have been exacerbated by a tough economy and competition.

But there's been a lot of change for the better in Waterloo Region.

Downtown Cambridge attracted the University of Waterloo School of Architecture - which Gibson says was a catalyst for the expansion of Conestoga College onto a new Cambridge campus nearing completion.

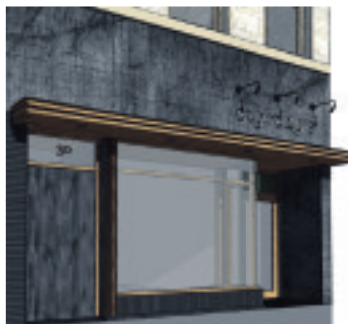
"It takes a few major things happening to create the right climate for a renaissance – like the two universities building campuses in Cambridge, and the building of new condominiums." Add in the theatre construction, and the work being done on the Cambridge Mill, and Gibson says that all that activity will attract business back to the core.

Gibson believes in core areas. He likes downtowns a lot more than malls and he believes that people would prefer to shop 'downtown' rather than get in their cars and hit the big box stores and strip malls on Highway 24. He says people want to walk and bike rather than drive, and a rejuvenated downtown would give them a place to do that.

Gibson is committed to this project and others he's tackled in the Waterloo Region. For one thing he went to school here, as did his kids. He feels a strong connection here.

And he also happens to think that "Cambridge has such a wonderful feel, and it has one of the most beautiful downtowns in the country. Then there's the proximity to the river. Even the housing in Cambridge is still affordable although that won't last forever. But this is a great community and it will only get better."

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Top is an artist's rendering of what 60 Main Street in Downtown Cambridge will look like when Perimeter Developments has finished renovations. Above are the before and after artist-renderings of 30 Main Street.

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Cambridge renaissance is on

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He says a renewed downtown will have businesses moving from Kitchener and Waterloo to Cambridge because it has "all the amenities and a great business environment."

Over the next five years Gibson is planning to spend \$3.5 to \$4m on renovations that will turn his block of buildings into something special.

It needs a complete overhaul. He says that in the case of 55 Main St., the eight residential units that are vacant need to be gutted to the stone walls. They'll be upscaled to attract architectural students and young professionals as tenants.

He says it's a labour of love. Somebody's got to do it, and Gibson figures he's the right guy for this job.

He says there's no Class A office space in downtown Cambridge. Renovated buildings can provide that.

When it comes to retail, Gibson says he won't lease out space until the units are completely rebuilt.

"We're taking the 'great bones' on these buildings and gutting the interiors, redoing them," explains Gibson. "The exteriors will be brought back to their glory days, and maybe some old building facades can be



Future of Cambridge Mill.

mixed with some new glass and facades."

Gibson has the right background for the task. He led First Gulf for 20 years, until he retired. Retirement lasted three months and he decided that doing projects he enjoyed beat boredom every time.

Now he and Perimeter Development, work on specialty projects, most of them in Waterloo Region – like the Breithaupt block in Kitchener.

"It's exciting work, but it takes capital and patience," says Gibson. He plans to open a Perimeter Development office in Waterloo Region soon.

He's anxious to see what happens with the LRT – he sees it as important for the area and hopes people will make "wise decisions" about it.

Gibson's plans, enthusiasm, and



Future of Grand Lofts Condos.

commitment have drawn high praise from Cambridge Mayor Doug Craig, but Gibson's not the only entrepreneur who believes the time is right to invest in Cambridge's downtown.

AAK Construction has taken on the task of renovating the Canadian Manufacturing Corporation (CMC) building and the Royal Hotel in downtown Galt, turning the space into condominiums. Speaking for AAK, Nicole Nolte says, "these buildings and downtown Galt have great potential. It just required some developers to take a chance to bring it from where it was to where it has gone, and where it's going to be."

The toughest part? "For both buildings, it was trying to preserve the building while meeting the new code requirements," says Nolte. "But with help from the City of

Cambridge, we've been able to work through it all and are now approaching the finishing details." When finished the CMC property will have 49 condos [The Grand Lofts], while the Royal Hotel space will have 12 residential and three commercial condos.

After close to a year of work, the Royal Hotel commercial spaces are scheduled to open in May and the residential spaces in July. As for the Grand Lofts – completion is scheduled for August.

The Landmark Group is investing \$7.5 million in downtown Cambridge. Specifically the company bought the Cambridge Mill on the Grand River and has spent the past year renovating and expanding it.

Aaron Ciancone describes it as a three year monster project. "It's a beautiful structure, all stone, and we knew it would need work, we just didn't know how much," says a rueful Ciancone.

Landmark owns the Ancaster Mill Restaurant and Spencers in Burlington, so siblings Aaron, James and Leanne know about restaurants, and old mills.

Still, until workers started, they didn't know how much rot there was in the old Cambridge grist mill that had been turned into a restaurant in 1979. Ciancone says that some floors had three to four different materials on them, and that weight caused some areas to sag up to eight inches. Naturally, that meant tearing out the first and second floors and starting over.

He says not a lot had been done in terms of upkeep on the structure for some time and some additions, like the use of beaded mortar that dated from the 1970s had to be chipped out and replaced for aesthetic reasons. All of that took "real craftsmen to rebuild, like putting capitals on columns and making sure that the glass and stone structure additions marched the original building."

Instead of patios the rebuilt mill boasts conservatories with retractable glass wall panels, a heating system, and wood-burning stone fireplaces so they can be used in shoulder seasons, not just summer.

The building was originally 13,000 sq ft, now it's 30,000 and will seat 600 counting restaurant and banquet hall seating. They've added a water feature at the entrance, and the structure has been renovated to be energy-efficient.

The Cambridge Mill will handle weddings or corporate functions with ease, and pre-sales before the first workman ventured into the property saw more than 150 functions booked – 130 of them weddings.

Ciancone says the event pre-booking was as strong as they hoped, and they haven't hit the tip of the iceberg yet with corporate.

He believed there would be a strong demand based on the number of weddings that are held in Waterloo Region and then people have to drive down to the Ancaster Mill to hold their receptions – to him it's obvious that the Waterloo Region is seriously under-served when it comes to hospitality.

The Cambridge Mill is Landmark's first venture in Waterloo Region and Ciancone says simply that he was captivated by the historical building and the river. Then he stared asking around about it and the hospitality industry. His sister was familiar with the area because she had gone to the University of Waterloo, and in fact will be managing the place when it opens.

That opening is scheduled for June – it has to be to accommodate some pre-booked weddings. But Ciancone says they already have about 20 to 25 staff hired and will hold a job fair near the beginning of June to bring staff to 125.

The menu will be casual in the conservatories, while the restaurant will feature full entrees in a more upscale setting. All the food will be local whenever possible and prepared in-house, or prepared at another location, like bread and rolls that will come in from their Bread Bar Bakery.

With all the work, Ciancone says that he's noticed it's time to do some upgrading on the Ancaster Mill, and Landmark has recently bought the mill in Elora with plans to renovate that and open it as a restaurant.

"What we've seen happening in the Cambridge core, the theatre, and renovations, has given us confidence in this city," says Ciancone.

It's all about that critical mass that Gibson talks about.

The combination of public and private investment.

This is going to be great!



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