

Road construction has led to a serious hit on downtown businesses: owner

By Brock Weir

Ongoing construction on Brookland Avenue near Yonge Street has led to a serious financial hit for area business owners, leaving one to question whether the Town cares for the little guy.

These concerns were raised at Council last week by Dennis Hurst, co-owner of the Yonge Street Winery, which helps patrons make and bottle their own vintage.

In approaching the podium in Open Forum, he told lawmakers he was not there to 'throw insults' or 'disrespect' anyone, but to act as an advocate for other small business owners in the area.

'People's livelihoods and personal wellbeing is at stake,' said Mr. Hurst. 'Starting tonight, the Town of Aurora, both on the political side, as well as the administrative side, need to recognize that major construction plans, as I believe has happened here, can have serious and devastating consequences on its citizens and, in this case, local citizens.'

'I am going to be very direct here: our revenue in November of 2017 has declined to 55 per cent compared to the same period last year and the prognosis for November so far is not encouraging. This is the direct result of ongoing construction on Brookland and the lack of consumer access to our plaza. We know this because prior to commencement of road construction our year over year revenues were increasing in a capable manner.'

Town Staff on hand for last week's Committee meeting said there had indeed been a breakdown meeting residents' needs and talks were ongoing to rectify the situation.

'We have been trying to provide some support to the businesses,' said Doug Nadorozny, CAO for the Town of Aurora, responding to questions from Councillor Michael Thompson on what has, and could be done to address the challenges facing business owners in the Brookland area. '[The construction] has clearly been more disruptive than we anticipated and, at the same time, I think it is safe to say we could have taken a little more time before this project started to anticipate the kind of challenges we are seeing on the site, particularly as it related to the site disruption. At this stage, I believe the worst of the disruption for the business is over.'

The CAO added he believed most of the work on the below-grade infrastructure was complete and while a gravel road will be in place for a little while before new asphalt can be applied, a total blockage of the plaza will be 'minimized.'

'In the future, we have committed to taking more time and thinking about the implications for businesses when these kinds of projects go on, both from a minimal and worst-case-scenario and try to have a better plan because we were certainly doing this on the fly.'

From Mr. Hurst's perspective, however, Council is not living up to its commitment to, as stated on the Town's website, to 'serve the residents of the Town of Aurora in a responsive and effective manner through leadership and legislative action for the present and future wellbeing of the community.'

'Tonight, as a small business owner, I have to be honest: I'm not feeling it, particularly the 'wellbeing' part,' Mr. Hurst contended. 'That marketing might make for nice window dressing on the Town's website, but the truth is, to me, not credible. Despite a well documented string of email and phone calls from my partner to the Town's administration office over the last six weeks, we have felt ignored. We have been humiliated and disrespected by the construction employees on site and, most of all, we felt abandoned by the Town ' and this is the Town we have been proud residents of since 1995 and [where] we have built our business since 1996.'

'Even though we have played by the rules for 21 years, paid substantial business taxes for 21 years, continuously supported the community through charities and kids' sports and hockey teams and the like, and paid for special fees for permits and signs all these years, we feel our rights have been completely violated simply because our company is not on the list of Fortune 100 companies Aurora seems to have preference for.'

'Our conclusion is our company and other businesses in this plaza simply aren't big enough to matter.'