



Cambridge Chamber of Commerce MasterMind Series  
**“Barriers to Growth and Development”**

The Chamber’s MasterMind Series brings together a group of members to discuss a specific topic related to business, or the community, in hopes of providing a direction for the Cambridge Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors in terms of advocating for public policies that will benefit businesses.

**Objective and Outcome:** Standing still is not something any community should ever contemplate. In fact, standing still could actually result in a step backwards. In order for a community to move forward, it must look at instigating new growth and development. However, here in Cambridge there are some barriers which surround our downtown pertaining to development. These include height restrictions, the eventual reinstatement of development charges for new core developments, and the protection of our heritage buildings. As well, the negative perception that looms over some of our core areas in relation to the impact of addiction, homelessness and other social issues often presents an even larger barrier. Our invited members discussed these issues at length to come up with solutions to encourage the City of Cambridge to consider in clearing the way for better, community-changing development in our core areas.

- **A key question that arose pertained to how to set the tone for big investments in our community, such as the Old Post Office/ ‘bookless’ library concept? And how can we assist the city in overcoming those barriers facing development or potential development?**

A discussion arose among the group about the possibility of setting up a fund – perhaps through the sale of industrial lands – dedicated to ‘community development’ when it comes to a project like the Old Post Office redevelopment which can become a ‘magnet’ to attract more people downtown. The issue was raised how the City was in full support of restoring the Idea Exchange’s Old Post Office, however, failed to provide any additional funding for programming in the revamped building. It was suggested the City has a confidence problem and quite often believes by just ‘building’ something will solve the issue, without taking into consideration that more investment is required to ensure its success.

- **A question arose surrounding the City’s identity. Does Cambridge wish to be known as community with a vast pool of young talent? Or does it want to be known as a community that focusses primarily on an industrial economy and attracts young families looking for a safe place to live with cheaper housing who are content to travel to neighbouring communities, such as Kitchener-Waterloo, to work?**

A very in-depth discussion began centred on the need for more ‘urban experiences’ in our downtown core in order to retain, or attract, a younger talent pool (mainly people between the ages of 18-30). It was stated the trend in Cambridge is for younger people to leave the area in pursuit of new opportunities once they graduate from post-

secondary school because they believe this city has nothing to offer them. As well, it was mentioned that companies seeking to bring their regional headquarters to this area don't view Cambridge as a place to set up shop, choosing Kitchener or Waterloo instead due to the perception they have a larger pool of young talent. It was suggested Cambridge's industrial sector remains strong as an economic tool, but the City must also acknowledge the fact it's downtown core can also be used utilized in a similar fashion and that investing there must be seen as a necessity. It was suggested if the City was betting solely on its industrial/manufacturing sector to keep its economy growing it was a losing bet. The expression 'battleground' was used to describe how in 10 to 20 years the need for a younger talent pool would be imperative to Cambridge's economic prosperity.

- **The need for creating 'urban experiences' to bring more visitors to the downtown core was unanimously accepted by the group, but questions surfaced as to how to make that happen?**

Creating partnerships with the private sector to create 'urban experiences' was one way the group decided that could work. A variety of ideas surfaced during the discussion, many of them which centred on using the Grand River as the catalyst for change. These included working with the Grand River Conservation Authority to create new recreation opportunities, such as tubing, paddle boating and even ice skating. It was suggested bringing a 'light show' in play across the Galt dam using some basic technology would be a draw as well as closing off a section of a downtown street to create a pedestrian mall. It was also suggested that turning to the high schools in Cambridge and having students help create new opportunities and festivals, perhaps with some financial support from the BIA, would benefit the city in the retention of young talent. The message clearly surfacing from the group indicated that the City doesn't have to provide a huge financial investment, especially in terms of new infrastructure, to make these sorts of experiences happen in the downtown core. The grand opening celebrations of the Old Post Office in July of 2018 was held up as an example. The group learned that at least 4,000 people turned out for the 'street party' to celebrate the opening which took place at a relatively small cost. In fact, since it opened, the Old Post Office has seen 100,000 visitors in the past year, with another 300,000 visiting the Idea Exchange at Queen's Square.

- **The need for policy changes surfaced as a priority among the group in order to stimulate new development and growth in the downtown core. But what could these changes entail?**

It was clear the group agreed that Cambridge must have a defined core area and that Galt was it, with no disrespect to Hespeler or Preston. After all, every city has a designated downtown. But in order to stimulate growth and prosperity in the downtown, several ideas surrounding policy changes arose. These included banning heavy trucks and creating more flexibility surrounding heritage properties in relation to new building permits. It was stated that uniformed treatment across the city regarding heritage properties doesn't work and that special provisions are needed downtown to create new development, keeping in mind how important the city's heritage structures are to its identity. It was also recommended the river be considered a main artery in the downtown, similar to the streets, and that a façade improvement grant be 'finetuned' to ensure the buildings that line it are kept in good shape. The current state of disrepair of

the former Carnegie library was raised as a prime example of the work that needs to be done. As well, it was mentioned that more consideration was needed regarding height requirements in the core regarding new developments. And finally, it was suggested that Cambridge should follow the example of other communities regarding the implementation of transit/Uber subsidies in order to entice more people to travel downtown.

- **There was a clear sense among the group that civic leadership will only take communities so far and private action is needed as the only meaningful way to affect change. It was suggested that in the age of social media a new breed of politician has emerged leaving a leadership 'void'. Is Cambridge void of real leadership?**

There were those around the table who agreed Cambridge was lacking in true civic leadership and that it was suggested city council was not a 'governance' council which is required when it comes to pushing for change. Although it was stated the city's mayor wants to stimulate new economic opportunities in the downtown and has been seeking advice from the business community, it was suggested she was being somewhat impeded by the current bureaucracy at City Hall and others' desire to be re-elected. The economic changes that occurred in Kitchener and Waterloo years ago under previous leadership, and how it's now paying off for those communities more than a decade later, was touted as something Cambridge should aspire to. The group talked about how taxpayers have in the past gotten onboard with various community initiatives, such as the expansion of the Cambridge Memorial Hospital, and the need for that to happen again with the revitalization of the downtown core. It was stated a clear vision needs to be communicated with taxpayers in order to achieve change and that every project doesn't have to be a large infrastructure initiative with millions of dollars attached, such as a multi-plex. Some around the table said 'traction' with civic leaders can come when other groups, such as the BIA or Chamber, help the private sector lobby for change. It was also suggested now may be the ideal time for Cambridge to take risks since the impending decision regarding possible amalgamation in our Region could drastically alter the playing field.

- **The first step in promoting growth and development downtown involves creating a clear message to residents and civic leaders. But why is that important and how do we go about it?**

The ongoing push to promote the Creative Capital of Canada movement in Cambridge was held up as a great example to the group regarding the importance of messaging and recommended the City capitalize on it. It was clear from the discussion that all believed Cambridge, especially the downtown, suffers from a negative perception due to various social issues, such as addiction and homelessness. These perceptions outweigh all the positive aspects the core has to offer. During the discussion of how to change this, which included talk of a co-ordinated social media approach involving such things as promotional videos, Instagram and Youtube videos, it was suggested that Cambridge residents have lost a sense of attachment to the downtown. In fact, it was stated that many residents only visit downtown when they are showing visitors around the area. To foster a sense of 'reattachment', there was talk of finding easy ways that don't require

any political approval at the civic level to create a groundswell of interest in the downtown. To start the ball rolling, the domain 'keepcambridgesecret.ca' has already been purchased in preparation for further enhancement. And once this happens, it was suggested the City be approached for further support to keep the momentum going, including using the services of a PR firm to change the downtown's image. It was stressed among the group that residents need to realize, even if they live in the suburbs, that our downtown defines who we are as a community and that it is a place for everyone to enjoy.

**Chamber Resolution:**

1. That the City of Cambridge establish a Core Area Transformation Fund intended to offer subsidies to attract new investment to the core districts.

And that the funding for this come from the Industrial Land Reserve to avoid any unnecessary impact on the tax rate.

2. That the City of Cambridge review height restrictions of development in the core areas to make redevelopment for housing attractive to investors.

And that the City of Cambridge work with the community and heritage interests to ensure new development policies compliments and enhances the heritage value of the downtown and that new investment is encouraged through these policies to repurpose, redevelop, and maximize every opportunity to create a livable, practical and aesthetically pleasing core area.