

POLICY RECOMMENDATION
Hamilton Chamber of Commerce

DATE: November 27, 2007

TITLE/SUBJECT: **Pedestrianization of Gore Park Area**

COMMITTEE: Business Development Committee

ACTION REQUIRED: Approval by Board of Directors to write a letter

DIRECTED TO: Mayor Fred Eisenberger and Members of City Council
City of Hamilton

BACKGROUND OF ISSUE:

Mayor Fred Eisenberger wants to give downtown a boost by creating a pedestrian mall on both sides of Gore Park, detouring all but bus traffic off King Street East between Catharine and James Streets.

The Mayor made his declaration at a recent meeting of the Public Works Committee on October 1, 2007 and reported that he would like to start a public debate about the initiative and extend the concept to other downtown cores in the city such as Dundas and Stoney Creek.

The Public Works Committee has now added the proposal to its 5-year review of the Downtown Transportation Master Plan and has directed staff to report on cost and implementation.

The Mayor's Goal however is to have something happen within a year.

The Downtown Hamilton BIA board discussed the concept at its recent meeting and agreed to keep an open mind by continuing to push the buses to be removed from the Gore Park area on the south leg of King Street to a MacNab Street location. Once that has been accomplished, the BIA would like to see a pilot project to close the south leg only from June 1 to Labour Day with some public community programming to bring back people to the area.

However, most BIA members are opposed to a permanent closure of the street especially the north leg of King Street East for the following reasons:

1. In the 1970s, many downtowns closed major streets and converted them to pedestrian malls as a way to attract customers. The success of such conversions has been minimal and thirty years later most have been converted back into traffic streets. Of the 200 or so pedestrian malls built during the past 40 years, only 30 remain today.

2. Experience in the US has shown beautifully designed pedestrian malls and streetscapes lined by empty buildings. Attractive pedestrian environments do not actually attract anyone. Conversely, many urban places that have not been provided with pedestrian amenities are crowded with people and thriving businesses. Toronto's Yonge Street is a classic example. Therefore, there is a correlation with people's activity patterns and why people are there and how they use the immediate environment.
3. Hamilton has had some success in converting streets such as James and John back to two-way traffic, which has sparked some retail infill and vibrancy in those areas. People must realize how important auto traffic is to the health of downtown retailers. Conversion of King from Queen to Wellington has been on the books for several years and may open traffic to both sides of King Street to more business ventures and successes. Many other communities are following Hamilton's initiative.
4. The main downtown shopping district ought to look and function more like a street than a park. In past experiences in another community where a pedestrian mall was instituted in the mid-70s at a cost of more than one million dollars, that same community is now spending another \$800,000 US to restore the street. Another US city is spending \$2.6M to scrap its downtown pedestrian mall, which originally cost \$4 M 20 years ago. Studies showed that buildings on nearby streets commanded higher rents than those on the mall itself. A recent Commercial Assessment Study of the Downtown Hamilton BIA commissioned by the City of Hamilton revealed that the financial well-being of Hamilton's core is now driven by its professional and institutional components not its retailers especially during peak morning, noon-hour and after work rush times. Other retail space taken up by discount stores, cheque-cashing services and other amenities cater to the lower income level of our regional market. The downtown Hamilton market is still too weak financially to sustain a vibrant higher end retail sector. As more units that are residential are built in the Downtown area this, will change and reflect the growing demand for retail services.
5. A pedestrian mall works best in a community that loves walking, and has a multitude of walkers nearby. Until Hamilton's plan for more upscale residential units materializes and the contemplated initiatives of both McMaster and Mohawk to put student facilities downtown, a pedestrian mall concept is premature. Most successful ones are incorporated into a redevelopment project such as a waterfront, riverfront, or historic district such as Pittsburg, Savanna, or New Orleans.
6. The Mayor's plan does nothing to remove the buses from the area. He exempts the bus traffic from the proposed vehicle ban concept in his initial remarks, which would defeat the main goal of providing a pleasant place for pedestrians, outdoor patios and more of a park-like setting to occur. The possible pedestrian friendly plan must incorporate a system of access for businesses within its zone for couriers, supply and maintenance vehicles as well.

7. The City of Hamilton must undertake a completely new plan for Gore Park that could include the south leg of King Street East and the possibility of re-opening or creating new public washrooms in the park or somewhere else in Downtown.

RECOMMENDATION:

That the Hamilton Chamber of Commerce add its voice to the discussion on the pedestrianization of Gore Park by pushing for the permanent solution to the removal of buses from the Gore Park Area as soon as possible; and

That the Chamber support an open dialogue with the downtown business community as to a temporary closure proposal for the south leg of King Street East, only on a pilot project basis.

The Chamber should continue to press the city for further investigations of other communities' experiences and encourage a complete environmental and traffic assessment of the effects of a complete closure of King Street East on the surrounding business and residential communities.