

The Corporation of the Town of Niagara-on-the-Lake Information Report to Council

SUBJECT: Queen Street Commercial Heritage District Round Table Review
DATE: 2025-04-29
REPORT #: CAO-25-016
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DEPARTMENT: CAO/Administration

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The Queen Street Commercial Heritage District is a vital part of Niagara-on-the-Lake's economic, cultural, and tourism landscape. In response to business feedback and as part of Council's commitment to strengthened community engagement, the Town's Government Relations, Economic Development and Tourism Officer hosted a series of Business Round Tables with businesses and interested parties from the district.

The initial roundtables were held on February 18 and 19, 2025. Due to high interest, two additional sessions were added on March 6 and 18, 2025. A total of 31 interested parties participated across the four sessions. These sessions were designed to identify emerging trends and better understand the opportunities and challenges facing the Queen Street Commercial Heritage District.

The conversations were facilitated in an open and respectful environment, where participants felt comfortable sharing their ideas, concerns, and hopes for the future.

Businesses expressed tremendous gratitude for the opportunity to be heard and emphasized a strong desire for regular communication and continued engagement with the Town. The sessions also generated a wealth of qualitative feedback that will help shape the Town's economic development approach, inform future decision-making, and guide support for downtown businesses. Themes ranged from infrastructure, signage, and heritage constraints to transit, tourism management, and seasonal activation. While challenges were noted, there was also a clear tone of optimism and collective commitment to ensuring the Queen Street Commercial Heritage District continues to thrive.

Recurring themes across all round tables included:

- **Municipal Infrastructure:**
 - Concerns regarding the condition of aging roads, sidewalks, lighting and utilities
 - Many felt infrastructure is not keeping pace with visitor volumes and business needs

- Sidewalk snow removal was flagged as a specific winter operations challenge, particularly in high-traffic pedestrian areas
- Business owners stressed the importance of timely, reliable snow clearing to ensure accessibility for both customers and staff
- Participants recognized the Town's investment in infrastructure upgrades and expressed a desire to continue collaborating on capital improvements that support economic activity
- **Parking and Transit:**
 - Parking remains a longstanding concern, with many expressing hope for tangible progress
 - Parking availability and enforcement inconsistencies noted
 - Most businesses expressed support for the new parking meters and modernized approach, viewing them as a step forward in improving the parking experience
 - Winter snow accumulation on solar panels was raised as a challenge, with requests for improved snow removal to maintain meter functionality
 - Lack of public transit options is seen as a barrier for both tourism and workforce mobility
 - Desire for more centralized designated bus drop-off/pick-up zones to reduce congestion
 - Desire expressed to explore opportunities for staff parking (e.g., Memorial Park)
- **Signage and Heritage Restrictions:**
 - Many expressed that the heritage signage guidelines are outdated and in need of a comprehensive review
 - There is a perception of inconsistent enforcement, with some businesses feeling penalized for compliance while others operate outside the rules without consequence
 - Participants emphasized the need for clearer, more flexible, and consistently applied standards that maintain heritage integrity while supporting business visibility
 - A specific request was made for improved directional signage to support shops not located directly on Queen Street, which are currently hard for visitors to find
 - Many stakeholders acknowledged the importance of maintaining the character and charm of the Heritage District and expressed a willingness to work collaboratively with the Town to find balanced solutions
 - Concerns were raised about the rigidity of the Municipal Heritage Committee's processes and controls, with several participants noting that the level of restriction can inhibit property and business owners from making even modest improvements
 - Participants suggested that these processes and controls discourage investment and reinvestment in the district, and called for a more solutions-oriented and collaborative approach to heritage compliance
 - Several businesses also raised concerns about the financial pressures associated with operating in a designated Heritage District, particularly related to higher costs of compliance and limitations on modernizations
 - There was confusion noted among participants regarding whether heritage tax rebates or grant programs currently exist, and how they function
 - Businesses expressed a desire for greater clarity and communication around available financial supports for heritage compliance
 - There was interest in the Town exploring the creation or enhancement of Heritage

Tax Credits and Grant Programs to help offset the added costs of maintaining heritage properties and to encourage preservation through positive reinforcement

- **Patios and Public Space:**

- There was a strong mix of opinions on seasonal patios, including their size, placement, and overall impact
- While some businesses view patios as positive for vibrancy and customer experience, others raised concerns about obstruction, visibility, and unequal benefits
- Fairness emerged as the dominant theme, with businesses calling for a transparent, consistent approach that does not favour one sector over another
- Broad support was given for exploring balanced solutions that allow for seasonal activation while ensuring equity across all business types
- Seasonal patios were seen by many as a valuable contributor to a lively, welcoming streetscape, particularly during peak tourism months

- **Street Closures and Events:**

- Mixed perspectives on frequency and impact
- Need for better coordination and communication regarding closures and event scheduling
- Participants expressed strong support for thoughtful event activation that enhances the vibrancy of the downtown and draws visitors to local storefronts
- Businesses support activation but want predictability and input
- Businesses want events to feel like an extension of their storefronts and services, not separate or disconnected experiences
- Businesses expressed a desire to relocate certain events to other areas (e.g., Simcoe Park)

- **Amenities and Public Realm:**

- More public washrooms, WiFi, and wayfinding signage cited as important visitor needs
- Simcoe Park was widely identified as a valuable but underutilized community asset, with strong enthusiasm for unlocking its potential through seasonal programming (e.g., summer music series, winter lights, small-scale activations)

- **Off-Season Activation:**

- There was strong interest in identifying creative ways to extend the tourism season and attract more local traffic during quieter months
- Many businesses stressed the importance of increasing visitation during the winter and shoulder seasons to support year-round economic sustainability
- Several participants expressed enthusiasm for enhancing seasonal animation, such as lighting, winter decorations, and localized off-season events
- Suggested operational incentives included free parking in the off-season to attract shoppers and reduce barriers to visitation
- Flexible signage allowances were suggested during slower months to improve visibility and support local promotions
- Participants noted that locals are more likely to visit in the off-season, presenting an opportunity to better engage the community through tailored programming and marketing

- **Business Coordination and Communication:**

- Requests for more proactive and transparent communication from the Town
- Desire for a centralized platform to share updates, initiatives, and feedback opportunities
- Frustration over inconsistent business hours, which creates confusion for visitors and disrupts the cohesiveness of the downtown experience
- Businesses encouraged collaboration around establishing core hours or voluntary guidelines to improve visitor expectations
- Opportunity to develop shared messaging and promotional materials that support coordinated operating schedules, particularly during peak seasons and events
- There was a clear sense of pride in operating in the district, and businesses expressed a willingness to work together to improve the overall visitor experience
- Several participants expressed a need for greater clarity in the roles and responsibilities of the Town, the Niagara-on-the-Lake Chamber of Commerce (Chamber), and the Destination Marketing Organization (DMO)
- It was noted that in the past, these entities were often viewed as interchangeable or overlapping, leading to confusion around accountability, advocacy, and service delivery
- Stakeholders expressed a strong desire for the Town to clearly articulate its own role, and to distinguish its municipal responsibilities from those of the Chamber and DMO
- Businesses also noted the importance of the DMO being seen as a distinct and professionally managed organization, separate from the Chamber, with transparent governance and measurable deliverables

- **Equity Among Business Sectors:**

- Strong sentiment that Queen Street businesses risk being overshadowed by the marketing focus on wineries
- Participants emphasized the need for a balanced tourism strategy that includes downtown retail and hospitality
- There was a shared concern that local and regional residents are not visiting the Queen Street Commercial Heritage District, contributing to reduced community buy-in and a sense that the downtown area is exclusively for tourists
- Businesses noted the importance of recognizing the two distinct visitor types that drive the local economy: luxury overnight guests and day-trippers
- Participants encouraged the Town and tourism partners to ensure equitable marketing, infrastructure support, and programming that reflects the needs of both groups

- **Accommodations and Workforce Housing**

- Impression that a significant increase in Short Term Rentals (STRs) has drastically reduced the availability of long-term rental housing
- Lack of local housing makes it difficult for businesses to attract and retain staff
- Many employees are now commuting from out of town
- Limited transit options add barriers for attracting staff
- Businesses experience staffing instability, reduced flexibility, and higher turnover
- Participants expressed a desire for the Town to explore balanced strategies that support both tourism and local workforce housing needs

CONCLUSION

The Queen Street Commercial Heritage District Business Round Tables have been a valuable step forward in deepening the Town's connection with the local business community. The feedback received highlights both the challenges businesses face and the pride they take in operating in such a unique and vibrant area.

Most notably, businesses expressed sincere gratitude for the opportunity to be heard and emphasized the need for continued, consistent engagement. Conversations were marked by a strong sense of collaboration, optimism, and shared commitment to improving the district for both visitors and residents.

This input will play a key role in shaping Town policies, operational planning, and economic development initiatives moving forward. Continued dialogue, paired with thoughtful action, will be essential to fostering a resilient, inclusive, and thriving local economy.

Staff wish to acknowledge and thank all participants for their strong support and active participation throughout the roundtable sessions and look forward to continued collaboration to strengthen and sustain a vibrant Queen Street Commercial Heritage District.

NEXT STEPS

- **Maintain Ongoing Engagement:**
Staff will continue open dialogue with Queen Street Heritage District businesses and intend to establish Business Round Tables as a regular, recurring engagement tool. These sessions will provide a platform for ongoing feedback, shared updates, and collaborative problem-solving.
- **Internal Review of Feedback Themes:**
Staff will circulate the findings from these sessions to relevant internal departments for awareness, particularly where operational/policy improvements or future planning considerations may apply (e.g., transit, parking, public realm, heritage, event coordination).
- **Inform Future Strategic Planning and Budgeting:**
Key takeaways from these sessions will inform broader strategic planning exercises and may be referenced during future budget processes, master plan reviews, and departmental work plans.
- **Clarify Organizational Roles and Distinctions:**
Several participants expressed a need for greater clarity in the respective roles of the Town, the Chamber of Commerce, and the Destination Marketing Organization (DMO). Moving forward, the Town will work collaboratively with both organizations to clearly communicate the distinct roles, responsibilities, and mandates of each partner. This will help ensure transparency, reduce confusion within the business community, and reinforce the Town's leadership in coordinating business engagement and tourism support.