

Main Street's revitalization a success

By Mark PavilonsEditor

Visitors to Schomberg's Main Street have more than doubled in recent years, boosting the local economy. Part of the success behind the trend is the Main Street Revitalization Strategy and the work of Economic Development department staff. Staff reported on the success story to council recently, noting Economic Development successfully leveraged grant funding from Rural Economic. The Revitalization Strategy focuses on four main pillars: marketing and promotion, economic development, organization and promotion, and physical design and improvements. The number of visits each tourist has made to Main Street have more than doubled since 2021, illustrating the economic impact on the community. Economic Development Staff intends to work with internal partners to establish sustainable program and service levels for the more community-focused efforts and physical improvements. Back in 2018, the Economic Development Division received \$52,000 from the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA) through the Rural Economic Development (RED) program. The RED program is a matching grant that funds projects that stimulate economic growth in Ontario's rural communities by helping to grow the local economy and remove barriers to economic development. This funding enabled staff to develop the Schomberg Main Street Revitalization Strategy and Action Plans. In March of 2019, Council endorsed the completed Schomberg Main Street Revitalization Strategy and Action Plans. The intent of the Strategy focused on enhancing Main Street for residents and tourists alike. The following statement outlines the project's vision: "Schomberg Main Street is the heart of a vibrant village that takes pride in its agricultural heritage. A walkable, picturesque destination for residents and tourists alike, Main Street has maintained its historic quality, while offering a mix of local services, unique shops, restaurants, and beautifully preserved homes." The Plan focused on three strategic high-level goals of attracting people through an increase of activation days, attracting more businesses that fit the character of Main Street, and enhancing the quality of place. Economic Development partnered with Central Counties Tourism (CCT) to help cover some of the costs associated with the Temporary Public Land Patio Program in both 2020 and 2021. CCT is also known by their tourist-facing alias as York Durham Headwaters, which is one of Ontario's Regional Tourism Organizations. In 2021, Economic Development Staff successfully applied for and received an additional \$69,701.50 in funding through the RED program over a two-year period, ending in March of 2023. This RED funding was matched by the Township and was used to advance several priority deliverables such as investment attraction, and tourism-driven and community-focused marketing materials. Part of the funding received in 2021 also allowed the Economic Development Division to hire a contract Schomberg Main Street Event and Marketing Coordinator. This position has been essential to the implementation of the actions and initiatives of the Main Street Revitalization Strategy. In 2022, Staff secured \$99,588.52 through a one-time grant program known as FedDev Ontario's Tourism Relief Fund (TRF), which was completed by December 31st, 2022. A total of \$70,477.35 was allocated to Main Street initiatives such as replacing all of the furniture in the newly renovated Schomberg Community Hall, a new community Christmas tree and hydro connection at the corner of Main Street and Doctor Kay Drive, support for the 2022 Temporary Public Land Patio Program, and part of the grant supported the activation and programming during events on Main Street. Elsewhere, the Economic Development Division was also able to cover a significant portion of the development costs for the Disc Golf Course at Cold Creek Conservation Area and the installation of the Indigenous Butterfly Art project at the King Heritage and Cultural Centre with the remaining funding. At the conclusion of both TRF and RED grant programs, Staff prepared reports to the government bodies that specified the economic impact that their funding had on Main Street. Staff continue to seek funding support for downtown revitalization and tourism related efforts. Recently, the Economic Development Division was successful in securing \$5,000 in matched grant funding through York Region's Tourism Fund (YRTF) to support the delivery and enhancement of the fourth Taste of Main event on Schomberg Main Street. The event runs through Sept. 24. Some notable highlights of the marketing and promotion of Main Street include the development of, and later substantial improvements to the www.schombergmainstreet.ca website. The site acts as a consumer facing asset to attract visitors to Schomberg's Main Street by showcasing "What's Going On," otherwise known as events, as well as places to shop and dine. As a result of increased activation, programming, and the marketing of Main Street, website traffic has increased by 33% with 22,844 page visits in 2021 and 30,342 in 2022. Complementary to the Schomberg Main Street website, are the dedicated Schomberg Main Street Facebook and Instagram pages. The Schomberg Main Street Facebook account currently has 841 followers and saw a 526% increase in page reach since June 2022. After being able to hire the Schomberg Main Street Event and Marketing Coordinator

(?Coordinator?), an Instagram page for Schomberg Main Street was also developed and has since garnered 901 followers. Economic Development also utilizes the dedicated tourism brand ExperienceKING and shop local brand ShopKING to cross promote Main Street events and businesses. Between these two accounts, they have a total of 1,875 Instagram followers and 2,374 Facebook followers. Additionally, 2,500 Schomberg Main Street Map and Tourism Brochures were distributed to businesses and also handed out during events to encourage attendees to return and experience the best that Main Street has to offer. Through the RED program, a window covering pilot program was launched, promoting Main Street as a destination to "Shop, Dine, and Experience" the best that businesses have to offer. A historical plaque about the history of Schomberg was also installed on the front of the Schomberg Community Hall. Staff are working with business owners that may be interested in additional window coverings, particularly for vacant units. Notable improvements to the physical design of Main Street were recognized through the review of the Village Urban Design Guidelines initiated by policy planning Staff which also included the completed renovation of the Schomberg Community Hall and the Lions Play Parkette. Both Township facilities have seen a rise in the use of these community gathering spaces, particularly for events post-renovations. In early 2022, the preliminary streetscaping plan was completed for Main Street in Schomberg, that included public input on various options to best optimize the appeal of the street. Capital funding has been allocated to developing detailed streetscaping plans for Main Street through the Township's budget process for 2025. In alignment with streetscaping plans, the parking stall lines were repainted on Main Street in 2022 to help maximize the street parking available. The 2023 installation of the Temporary Public Land Patios mark the fourth year that "pop-up patios" have been on Main Street. The program originated out of a need to enhance opportunities for restaurants to maximize their capacity due to COVID-19 lockdown restrictions and have since evolved to bring vibrancy to the street as a form of activation. The patios are well-liked by residents and tourists alike. The coordination of these patios is thanks in part to assistance from several Departments including Growth Management Services, Public Works and Community Services. Economic Development is promoting the Community Improvement Plan (?CIP?) grant program. Since the start of implementation of the Revitalization Strategy in 2019, a total of 15 applications have been approved for Main Street businesses, meaning over \$80,000 has been distributed. The CIP grant program has enticed business owners to make investments in their properties, as the program has matching dollars for most grant categories. As a testament of the success of the strategy, property owners are contributing to the revitalization of businesses on Main Street over and above the upgrades made through the CIP grant program. Business surveys and interviews were conducted and completed this past spring. The survey asked businesses to evaluate specific aspects of running a business on Main Street in Schomberg, including the advantages and disadvantages as well as the impact of events on their business, gathering feedback on the impact of the Revitalization Strategy. Results analyzed show that 87% of participants agree that Main Street is an excellent place to have a business. This is compared to the initial survey completed in 2018 where 76% of respondents agreed that Main Street is an excellent place to have a business. When asked about their 3-year business plans, 52% of respondents were not sure of their plans to remain on Main Street in 2018 compared to only 13% in 2023. Focusing and investing in downtown revitalization efforts on Main Street has improved business confidence and increased business investment over the last five years, a direct result of the Schomberg Main Street Revitalization Strategy. The substantial increase in tourists visiting Main Street benefited multiple sectors and the Schomberg community by marketing Schomberg's Main Street as a destination. For example, one of the signature events implemented as an action item of the Revitalization Strategy, Taste of Main, demonstrates a great success for restaurants and businesses on the street. Results indicate a 30% increase in revenue in 2023 in comparison to 2022. Due to the assistance of the RED grant, Staff have been able to create an organization model to follow for future events that will be replicated and enhanced following each event date. To bring a festive atmosphere to Main Street during the peak shopping season, an event called Light the Night took place on Dec. 10, 2022 in the newly renovated Lions parkette. This activation was funded through TRF and RED. As the Township continues to evolve and acquire more resources, Economic Development intends to work with internal partners and transfer some of the more community-focused efforts and physical improvements to more appropriate departments. For example, Community Services has Staff dedicated to the event planning, promotion, marketing, and sponsorship of Township events that may be well suited to oversee signature events that Economic Development introduced to Main Street as a result of hiring the contract Coordinator. Events such as Sidewalkable Saturday, Taste of Main, and Light the Night could run under the guidance of Community Services Staff that contribute to overarching goals of attracting people and businesses to Main Street.