

# Kitchener's core the focus of attention

By Ronald F. Wolf

When you feel lonely you can always go ...that's right - downtown. Downtown anywhere can be and always has been a place of commerce, unique shops, movie shows and, unfortunately at times, poverty and crime. Not every downtown core is thriving but downtown Kitchener is coming back to life - a welcome rejuvenation of an urban scene that has been central to the character of Kitchener since the days when it was called Berlin.

These days the core is reinventing itself with unique shops, upscale condos, university expansion and prosperity. But no city core can undergo this kind of metamorphosis without an informed and involved city hall to drive the agenda and Kitchener is no exemption. Kitchener Mayor Carl Zehr likes the spirit and pride of the core.

"What I like most about the downtown development is that it is bringing back a spirit of pride and excitement of what an urban community can be," said Zehr.

He believes the next 10 years for the core could bring, "more people living, working, playing and being educated in our downtown. These people will animate and energize the street activity."

Kitchener's city hall has been called 'the people's city hall' with good reason - it is open to the people year-round. And that sets a tone for the city and its development. Certainly downtown merchants sound energized and optimistic.

Earthwinds, in the heart of the core, is a shop that sells unique items from around the world. Earthwinds' Manager Kate Cox only arrived in Canada from her native England in March, 2006, but she has become a real booster of her new home.

"I really like the diversity and the ways downtown feels so much more real than Waterloo for all its imperfections," said Cox. "I also like the feeling that downtown is about to have a real revitalization. It's very exciting to be part of this from the start."

Cox would like to see more free parking - for longer than two hours, and more heritage preservation of older buildings.

"Even in the short time I have been here, I



Dump trucks haul away soil contaminated by coal tar at the Joseph and Gaukel Street site in Kitchener's downtown (above) while construction of the University of Waterloo School of Pharmacy and Downtown Kitchener Health Sciences Campus continues on the northwest corner of King West and Victoria Streets.

Photos By Ron Wolf

have been astounded at the amount of development, the introduction of the new schools, and residential buildings. It really smacks of huge growth and an exciting enrichment of the community to come," said Cox though she admits there have been some losses, "it was a blow to lose the cinema (Kings College)."

Karen Redman, Liberal MP for Kitchener and Chief Opposition Whip is a lifetime resident of Kitchener and has been living in the core for 28 years. She said, "we choose to live here, to raise our family here; we think there's a lot of pluses to be in the heart of the city."

The sense of neighbourhood is one of the things Redman likes the most. "I think it's the sense of neighbourhood because so many people choose to live in the core. It's not by default or accident. They love the old trees, the old homes. They love to be able to access Kitchener's Farmer Market. I think Victoria Park is an incredible jewel that a lot of people don't appreciate, who don't go there regularly."

Over the past few years there have been many changes that Redman applauds like, "the explosion of lofts, the adaptation of use for the former industrial buildings. I think bringing people downtown is absolutely essential for the vitality of downtown and I'm thrilled to see that happening."

Redman's office has been located on the corner of King and Benton Streets for the past 10 years and it's no accident she's there.

"It was a very deliberate decision on my part to locate in the heart of the city," said Redman. She wanted her office there to be accessible on bus routes and perhaps draw people downtown who didn't normally go there.

"I would recommend living downtown to everyone," enthused Redman. "We have a lot to be proud of."

Yvonne Zensner, owner of The Cake Box, in downtown Kitchener, said the core is changing for the better. "The downtown core is in a transitional period and I sincerely believe it is changing for the better," said Zensner.

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