

Business impacts need to be looked at during road reconstructions: Council

By Brock Weir

2017 should have been a year of 'great promise and greater achievement' for his Yonge Street business. Instead, thanks to some long-delayed road reconstruction, 2017 was 'a year of disappointment' for Dennis Hirst.

Hirst owns the Yonge Street Winery, a D-I-Y wine operation at the northwest corner of Yonge and Brookland Avenue.

Nestled in a plaza across from the LCBO, his location was at the epicentre of the extensive and protracted reconstruction of Brookland, a process which left business owners hurting and infuriated, he said.

'Our experiences during the months of October, November and December with the construction workers was nothing short of infuriating,' said Mr. Hirst, appearing at Council last week to support a motion from Councillor Harold Kim which will look at lessons learned during this project that will help ease the process in future for business owners.

'This motion is progressive and long overdue,' said Mr. Hirst, giving kudos to not only Councillor Kim for his support in finding a resolution, but also Councillors Tom Mrakas and Michael Thompson.

'Your genuine concern over the wellbeing of our businesses in our plaza and the safety of residents living on Brookland Avenue has really returned my faith in people, and municipal politics in Aurora is in very good hands. However, three months later, Brookland Avenue construction is not yet complete. There is more finishing work to be done in 2018, although the most stressful part of the project appears to be nearly over.

'How did we fare as a business? Let's just say what should have been a year of great promise and greater achievement became a year of disappointment. Here we are, it's 2018, and despite the new challenges that every local business faces this year, road construction in Aurora doesn't have to be one of them. Let's learn from our history and together let's try not to repeat the mistakes of the past.'

Communication between the Town and local business owners was one of the most significant breakdowns, he said, and a process which Councillor Kim aimed to help in his motion, which was ultimately passed by Council.

Through the motion, Councillor Kim called on staff to come back with a report on challenges encountered by residents and business owners in the Brookland area throughout the road project, successes, what was learned through the process, a path forward in engaging business owners, and recommendations that should be included in future road projects.

'The motion is designed to ask staff, as we do in a lot of the projects, to have a look back, review what was done right, review what was not done, what could have been done better, and come back with a report of what a more efficient process would look like with regards to communicating with the business owners,' said Councillor Kim.

Some of the issues business owners were facing in this situation 'including challenges accessing their businesses and ensuring potential customers knew they remained open during the process' were not being adequately monitored.

'[Open signs] can be easily camouflaged amongst the other construction signs,' said Councillor Kim. 'Unlike the LCBO, its revenues probably didn't really decline because people would probably climb over steep hills to get their alcohol, but for Wimpy's, the variety stores, it is more of a challenge and people choose to go somewhere further away. [This report] I think is something that is much needed.'

Council members agreed, stating that while the report might be much needed, so too is action.

'It would be my expectation from an organizational perspective [that] we always have a process of continuous improvement and we're always evaluating things and learning from it and trying to get better,' said Councillor Michael Thompson. 'I don't want anyone to see this motion and think we don't do this already, but this might be a more broad perspective.'

With this motion, however, Councillor Wendy Gaertner cautioned it is important to consider the needs of nearby residents as well.

'The weather was instrumental in causing problems, and it was the residents in the apartment building and the manager I was in communication with,' she said. 'To me, there was a serious lack of communication between our staff and the manager and, therefore, the manager and the residents. I think we need to look at that. There were cars that got stuck in the mud on the road. I think on one occasion the resident was so mad they actually got the construction crew to push them out and another had it towed. People had to walk and they really couldn't ' it was impossible there was so much mud. We just need to take into consideration how it is going to affect the residents on the ground better.'

From Mayor Geoff Dawe's perspective, there was already a lesson learned 'that maybe sometimes the lowest bidder on any project isn't always the best option.

'We can always improve what we do, but it should be pointed out that with the number of projects we do, we have relatively few bad ones,' he said. 'This is one of them, but there are relatively few. I think we sometimes put ourselves in peril by picking the least

expensive, as opposed to the most qualified. I would like to look at that as well, and maybe that is something the Finance Advisory Committee can look at as well.?