

Cities finding universities perfect partners

Building satellite campuses helps revitalize their downtown cores

By James Bow
Business Edge

Mayor Mike Hancock of Brantford is candid about the state of his city's downtown core 10 years ago. "You couldn't give away property in our core. We know; we tried that. We even tried paying developers to take over property. The interest wasn't there."

Brantford, a blue-collar municipality of 93,000 in south-western Ontario, is famous as the home of inventor Alexander Graham Bell and hockey icon Wayne Gretzky.

But the city encountered hard times in the 1980s when manufacturers such as White Farm Equipment, Massey Ferguson and Harding Carpets went bankrupt, rendering thousands unemployed. Brantford's downtown decayed, stores closed and buildings sat abandoned.

Making the problem worse was that there was no college or university in the area.

"We've always felt a little short-changed when it came to our post-secondary institutions," Hancock says. "You could see it in our demographics. The numbers would crash when you got to people aged 18 to 20. Our children would graduate from high school, leave the community to go to university and never come back."

To counter this, Brantford city council approached nearby universities, including McMaster, Waterloo and Western Ontario, about setting up satellite campuses in the downtown. The negotiations were unsuccessful.

Then, in 1998, Wilfrid Laurier University came forward with an offer to set up a campus in Brantford's downtown core.

"It was serendipitous," Hancock says. "It was very welcome."

"Our president heard that there was a local group, the Grand Valley Educational Society, looking into starting a private university in Brantford," says Bruce Arai, acting dean of Wilfrid Laurier's Brantford campus. "Brantford was one of the few communities in Ontario of considerable size that didn't have a university, giving a satellite campus a good

chance of being successful."

A rapidly growing university in Waterloo, Wilfrid Laurier was in need of new space.

The university established its Brantford campus in 1999 with 40 students and two faculty members, operating in a restored historic Carnegie Library in Brantford's downtown core. Today, the Brantford campus has 1,500 students, 44 full-time faculty, 25 staff positions and dozens of part-time instructors.

The physical plant has expanded, too. Arai says. "Since the original Brantford Carnegie Library — our first and still our main building — we have restored the original Brantford Post House to a residence, the old Odeon theatre to house classrooms and offices, and the Wilkes House into a residence and recreation centre."

Brantford contributed \$12 million in real estate and revenue from its casino to help Wilfrid Laurier restore the historic properties that had been sitting vacant.

Wilfrid Laurier also renovated Grand River Hall as well as a stand-alone bank building that houses the faculty, staff and classrooms of Nipissing University in North Bay, which partnered with Wilfrid Laurier to offer courses in Brantford.

"This has produced a substantial change," Hancock says. "Not only in cleaning up and opening up abandoned buildings, but also in the number of people who are downtown spending money. I've heard it said that students spend as much as \$10,000 a semester on housing, clothing, food and pizzas," Hancock adds. "In total, I think there has been as much as \$13 million to \$15 million in additional spending in the downtown since the Brantford campus opened.

"The students altered the demographic of our core," the mayor notes, "and that combined with increased police presence and Wilfrid Laurier's security, helps to ensure that our students live in a safe environment. The downtown has become a much more enjoyable place for our older residents to come to as well."

The new campus has sparked interest in redeveloping Brantford's downtown core.

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Bruce Arai



Photo courtesy of Laurier Brantford

Brantford Mayor Mike Hancock stands in front of the refurbished Post House residence.

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Campus helping city keep 'best, brightest'

"When Wilfrid Laurier arrived, we offered up a building to developers as possible housing and had only one party step forward for our tender," Hancock says. "A year later, we offered up the property next to the first and had far more interest. A number of retailers and restaurants are reporting that business is picking up. The owner of a downtown stereo shop told me that sales were up and the manager of a local restaurant stated that this year there was no January lull."

"Of the 1,500 students, about 300 are local," he adds. "The campus has allowed us to hold on to our best and brightest."

Brantford's success has been mirrored elsewhere in southern Ontario, as more municipalities turn to educational institutions to revitalize their downtown cores.

The City of Cambridge and the University of Waterloo entered into an agreement that moved the university's school

of architecture into a historic textile mill on the banks of the Grand River in Galt City Centre, an hour's drive north of Brantford. The structure had been abandoned.

"The effort was spearheaded by four businessmen and myself to work up a proposal and ask the University of Waterloo to relocate its school of architecture here," says Cambridge's Mayor Doug Craig. "From there, it took time, energy and money."

In fall 2000, with the University of Waterloo looking for additional space to house its architecture school, four local businessmen, Tom Watson of Century 21 Watson Realty, Jim Cassel of Ariscraft International, Val O'Donovan of Com Dev International Ltd. and John Wright of the nearby Southworks Mall, saw an opportunity to restore the derelict Riverside Silk Mill.

The idea was to make use of a prominent and picturesque

property and bring new people to the area.

Rather than razing the structure and building something new, the architecture school and the city benefited from restoring a part of Galt's industrial heritage. The school opened in September 2004 and the project has attracted the attention of the architectural community worldwide, winning a Wood Works national heritage award in 2005.

"The attitude was that rehabilitating a historic, architecturally significant building made for a better showpiece for the school of architecture than something new," Craig says. "It was practical, functional and very well received by the architects who have come to see the structure."

The architecture school now has more than 400 staff and students, and according to the mayor, the project has exceeded expectations.

"We put in \$7.5 million and

raised \$25 million from federal and provincial sources. From that, the school of architecture has been a catalyst to the redevelopment of the Galt City Centre," Craig says. "Not only did it clean up the building site, but it increased the need for housing and encouraged considerable investment in the area from developers and businesses seeking to serve the new population."

"The arrival of so many students in the downtown has brought a few challenges, but overall it has been extremely positive," Brantford's Hancock says. "It is changing our culture and bringing new life to the city as a whole. We have become a university town."

Wilfrid Laurier's Arai agrees. "The residents have welcomed us with open arms and with an

openness and generosity that is truly refreshing. It is remarkable to work in a community where your efforts are truly appreciated and many of the faculty and staff that work here feel this very strongly."

As a result of the successes of Brantford and Cambridge, Arai expects more satellite campuses to open throughout the province.

"Wilfrid Laurier's faculty of social work is moving to downtown Kitchener, as is a joint University of Waterloo-McMaster medical school," Arai says. "McMaster is also planning to open a satellite campus in Burlington, and Lakehead will be opening a satellite campus in Orillia. So this seems to be a real trend right now."

(James Bow can be reached at bow@businessedge.ca)

TREASURE from Page 17

Clients must understand risks in buying vacant lots: Re/Max

"Kingston is like a unique treasure most people haven't found yet," says Bob McKean of Re/Max Realty Concepts in Kingston. "It's not as busy as a lot of your other areas in the province, which provides the perfect environment to relax in."

Two-season or four-season cottages and vacant lots are the most popular, McKean says. But he has mixed feelings when it comes to recommending vacant lots to clients. "You have to remember there are almost two sets of rules with what you can and cannot do."

Myriad provincial and municipal bylaws on new construction often restrict what property owners can do with

mature trees or buildings near the waterfront, McKean says.

He adds that he has seen two property owners – one wanting to renovate an existing cottage and the other next door erecting an entirely new structure – get frustrated with the red tape.

McKean recommends buyers check with municipalities on what is allowed before they sign their purchase agreement. "Big dreams could unfortunately turn into wishful thinking," he says.

Peterborough and the Kawartha Lakes area also posted strong gains in the Re/Max market survey. During summer weekends, area residents have grown accustomed to a long line of cars and boat trailers

coming from Toronto and heading north along Highway 115.

"We're keeping a close eye on our family investment," says Jennifer Atkinson of Toronto, who was stopped recently at a Country Style doughnut store along the highway. "You could spend the weekend studying your stock portfolio or you could enjoy life at your cottage. Which sounds better to you?"

Atkinson says she wasn't sure how much her family originally paid for their Rice Lake cottage when they bought it several generations ago or what it was valued at now.

But the Re/Max report shows a three-bedroom winterized cottage on the western part of the Kawartha Lakes would have sold for \$140,000 to \$160,000 in 2000. This year, a similar cottage property would sell for \$300,000 to \$325,000.

By comparison, a similar property in Moncton, N.B., would have increased to \$125,000 from between \$75,000 to \$100,000 in the same period.

"I think I'm going to enjoy our cottage even more now this weekend," Atkinson said, after hearing the numbers.

(David Hatton can be reached at hatton@businessedge.ca)

Aussie financial firm completes deal

Business Edge

Australian financial services firm Macquarie Group has finished its acquisition of Toronto-based Cervus Financial Corp. for \$12.5 million.

In the short term Cervus will continue to operate as Cervus, while its staff will be considered Macquarie employees.

Cervus offers residential mortgages through a long-term broker model.

Trading in Cervus shares was suspended last month for failure to meet TSX listing requirements.

The newly capitalized company says it plans an aggressive push into Canada's \$660-billion residential mortgage market.

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