

VENTURE

HURDLES / ROAD HAZARDS

Conestogo construction gets personal for business owners

Owner of Auburn Vintage Clothiers has been chronicling the months-long impact of Sawmill Rd closure

ALI WILSON

THERE'S SOME LIGHT VISIBLE, with road construction in Conestogo set to wrap up in a few weeks, but it's been a real hardship for the small contingent of businesses along the Sawmill Road corridor.

Most vocal among the shopkeepers there has been Rachel Behling, owner of Auburn Vintage Clothiers, who's been keeping a running account of the trials and tribulations. A list of spottily dated blog posts etch over her website chronicling her journey with the construction, each more dire than before.

Even with the reopening a month ago of the Sawmill Road and Northfield Drive intersection after a two-month closure, Behling feared for the longevity of her business.

"Unfortunately the months for me to have made major money were April and August – April has always been a really great month, August has usually been a great month typically closer to school – and it's just been devastating," she said. "More often than not it was just my spirit went from really excited about what I do, to almost dreading what I do because no one would come in."

After having the dream to own her own vintage shop, Behling chose Conestogo as the locale just over two years ago.



Rachel Behling out front of Auburn Vintage Clothiers, her Conestogo business that has been at the centre of the Sawmill Road closure for much of the year. (ALI WILSON / THE OBSERVER)

She originally chose to have her storefront there because of the venue, the major thoroughfare and the feeling she got when she first entered the building's front door.

"It is a major thoroughfare. It is a lovely little town. I couldn't get such a beautiful place like this up-town. As soon as I walked in I thought it was the right place for me," she said. "Conestogo has almost a Niagara on the Lake feel on a smaller scale. It is beautiful here in the fall, it is absolutely gorgeous."

Just now, that's not the case, as the Region of Waterloo carries out a full reconstruction of the road and underground services. It's not just the scenery that's taken a blow, but the accessibility to the businesses, with foot and vehicle traffic all but cut off for most of the summer and into the fall.

That's had a devastating impact on her business, which relies on the in-person experience.

"It is a very eclectic mix of people. Those who love vintage tend to love an-

tiques, they love history, they are well educated, they love to read. I have groups of people in who love the history of pieces, so I walk people down memory lane and show them different pieces. It really is a passion if you're looking for good service, if you're looking for beautiful," she said. "This is why I have a brick-and-mortar store, because most people will say, 'why don't you just go online?' But for vintage I think you have to have a face-to-face. I think you have to try it on, feel the

fabric – it is a very personal experience. It is very different than a newer store with jeans and t-shirts. It is definitely an experience, and I don't want people to stop having experiences. We can do so much online now that it is nice to have that face-to-face."

Having lost easy access to her store, she said she feels a sense of loss for her business, where previously she had a sense of prosperity.

"Do I redress my mannequins? Do I redress my

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FOOD FOR THOUGHT/
OWEN ROBERTS

Efforts intensify to regulate organic products



A BIG QUESTION HANGING over the ag. sector this Thanksgiving is how to regulate organic food.

Now, the question doesn't affect everyone. Conventional food is by far the preferred choice of most Canadians.

But organic is a growing sector. And it feels stymied by its own lack of regulations. Many of its members think more consumers would be more apt to buy organic products if they felt confident that the sector was regulated appropriately.

Readers may remember that the question prompted the sector to issue a report in September called The State of Organics: Federal-Provincial-Territorial Performance Report 2017.

In that report, the organic trade association said Ontario is the province with the most ground to gain with organic market consistency across Canada. It also vowed to turn up the heat on the issue this fall.

And that's what it's done. MPPs Peter Tabuns and Sylvia Jones have now co-sponsored a private member's bill for organic products regulation in Ontario.

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CONESTOGO: A bumpy road for those stuck waiting for the construction to be completed

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windows? What am I doing wrong? Why is no one coming in? Then realizing that what happens outside of my door is beyond my control right now. That is very hard to take – you feel like you’re being punished when you haven’t done anything,” she said. “At the end of the day I don’t get a paycheque. I am now sup-

plementing from my own savings to pay my rent, which is not why I went in to business. I didn’t do this to be a millionaire, but I did do this to at least generate some income for my family. I feel for my family because there have been lots of tears on my part when I get home because I feel like a failure, but again hopefully, I am being positive that this will change.”

While she knows the construction had to happen, she says she wishes they had thought more about the businesses in planning the phases.

“The people who have come in from the region have been really kind, particularly at the beginning, but, you know, they get busy and they might forget that there might be someone sitting here fretting about

whether or not their business is going to survive.”

Waterloo Region’s Jim Ellerman says they informed all effected by the project ahead of time and that they have stuck to their schedule, but that there was no way around doing what they had done to get the necessary work finished.

“There was definite communication sent by the region multiple times to



Rachel Behling

all of the residents and all of the business owners in the Village of Conestogo explaining that the road would be closed to through traffic and that we would maintain local traffic. That has been the plan and what we stuck to over the last five months,” he said. “The road had to be fully closed to install that water main

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CONESTOGO: Chiropractor finds that patients have been willing to deal with all the hurdles

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so unfortunately there was no other way to do that work.”

While Behling has felt the discomfort over the construction period, neighbour and fellow Conestogo business owner Dr. Peter Smith can't say the same.

“Actually the summer for us has been really good. I have been in prac-

tice 26 years and June, for instance, was our best June ever, so I can't really complain about anything. For us, it's not dependant on if there is a road or not a road. It has been great. The construction company has been very helpful, the crew has been helping our patients get through,” said the chiropractor. “We are different because we are not dependant on drive-by

traffic like a clothing store or restaurant – we are a destination, people come here because they have an appointment so the people keep coming.”

Smith, who has been operating his practice in Conestogo for six years, has gone through construction worry before, and made it to the other side.

“When I was in Waterloo I had my front street ripped

up for a year, so I have gone through this before. My experience is that people keep coming,” he said.

“End of October it is going to be a distant memory. It is a hurdle, that is it.”

Although Behling appreciates that the work had to be finished and thanks the construction crew for their work in the community,

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Behling has spent many quiet days in her shop as customers have not had easy access to the core of the village. (ALI WILSON / THE OBSERVER)

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ROBERTS: Organic producers see advantages to rules offering assurances to customers

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Jones worked with the Organic Council of Ontario to develop the bill. She says she hopes it starts a dialogue with farmers and other stakeholders about how Ontario can align itself with the regulations adopted in five other provinces, and at the federal level.

Starting a dialogue might be all it does for now, considering that private members' bills don't usually get too far. But the intention is sound.

In this country, organic production is guided by the Canada Organic Regime,

created in 2009. It provides guidelines to the organic sector about what is, and what isn't, certified organic, and how to produce it. But the regime doesn't cover claims within provinces.

In Ontario, it is only enforced for products that carry the Canada Organic Logo and those that are exported outside of Ontario.

The Organic Council of Ontario worries, understandably, that without regulation and enforcement, unscrupulous producers might call their products organic when

they're not. The industry – or any industry, for that matter – looks bad when consumers get duped.

A complicating factor though is that some producers – particularly small ones – simply don't want the trouble of certifying their crops or livestock. They think it's an administrative pain, busywork, or unnecessary for their customers.

That doesn't mean they're being deceitful. Rather, like many farmers, they're fed up with third-party intervention in their operations.

But the upshot is that

consumers are left unprotected.

The council thinks the answer is somewhere in the middle, between no certification and onerous regulations. Options could include tailored certification programs for small-scale farmers making organic claims and financial support that would help them do so.

"We know there are many honest, hard-working organic farmers in Ontario who don't certify. This bill is meant to be the start of a dialogue that leads to a made-in-Ontario solution," says the council's executive

director Carolyn Young.

Confusion over organic products is not limited to Ontario, nor to the fruit and vegetables that are widely associated with organic production.

For example, according to information from Quebec-based organic giant duBreton, a recent survey showed almost one-third of Canadians either know nothing about or are confused by organic meat. As well, more than 40 per cent are frustrated by the lack of organic meat options in grocery stores.

And in the U.S., legislation is being proposed

to beef-up oversight and enforcement of organic standards, particularly for imports, some of which the government thinks may not be truly organic.

That's not a big problem for Canadian organic producers. Right now, they can't meet domestic demand, let alone export much to the U.S. But if regulations improve and production increases, all that could change.

In any event, at this time of the year, let's be thankful for the food we have – conventional or organic – and be mindful of those who aren't so lucky.

CONESTOGO: Plenty of lessons to be learned about communication, suggests shop owner

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the damage done to her evergreen business may be too much to be repaired.

"I have always said from the get-go that a positive day is when someone even comes in the door – it doesn't matter necessarily if they buy something because if they are touched, if they are impressed, they will tell ten people. That to me is good business sense that someone will come back and they will buy,

they will tell others. That just hasn't been happening because no one is coming in," she said. "When Rumbletum (Café) and Black Forest (Inn) closed, I felt like I was all alone."

Besides the letter notifying the commencing of roadwork, Behling said even now she has yet to receive any documentation on how or if she will be compensated for the losses she has endured as a result of the construction.

"There has been no

financial discussion whatsoever."

Behling has a few recommendations for the region to help business owners avoid the turmoil she has felt through the entire experience: financial compensation to help cover fixed costs like rent, easier to navigate signage and better advertising to show that the businesses are open – things she wishes she had suggested from the start.

"And a little compassion

I think would go along way," she said. "In a small town you feel like they forget about you, 'well you're only one of five businesses, what does it matter if they close?' Well, it matters to the person who's dream it is and that's the conversation. It is emotional."

Looking forward, she hopes there can be an elimination of barriers to allow for an open conversation to appear within the planning process.

"And there seems to be

an us-and-them mentality. I would like that to stop because I think that we can work together much better," she said. "Those are the kind of things that I would like to see happen, like there shouldn't have to be rallies, there shouldn't have to be angry blogs or angry phone calls to members of parliament; it should just be an open communication, and I think that's where things have failed."

So will she be able to make it through?

"I don't know, I don't know. That's what keeps me up at night. What should I do?" she said. "So will I be here? My best answer is I really hope so I would really love to stay and I know that I have clients that would love me to stay, so if anything it is for them that I do this."

"But the fear is, will they do it again? And if it is like this, I don't want to go through this again.

"It has been a long summer."

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