

Ghost town in the Beach

DAVID NICKLE

dnickle@insidetoronto.com

It was two years ago that Stephanie Cooke came to Queen Street East in the Beach as manager of the Muttonhead outdoor clothing store - and her first impressions were very good.

It didn't last.

"When I first started working in this location I brought my husband over and I said to him I could totally see myself moving over here," said Cooke, who was - and still is - commuting from the west end. "We had a nice walk on the beach. It was so cute. But in the small space that I've been working here, so many businesses have closed down. I don't have the same excitement for the area."

This is a reality for Queen Street east of Woodbine Avenue. A walk along Queen Street just a few blocks to the west of Muttonhead revealed a count of 30 vacant storefronts, and some notable absences including the venerable Whitlocks, which closed in February after 27 years serving up food in the Beach. Although the waterfront community has a reputation as one of the most attractive and desirable neighbourhoods in the city, significant parts of its retail strip resemble a Rust Belt ghost town.

Cooke says the gaps in the retail landscape are the visible part of the problem, but there is a larger, invisible force at work: or rather, an all-too visible absence.

"When it comes to shopping locally and supporting locally, the money isn't there," said Cooke. "A lot of people are probably house poor. They spend most of what they have in their home."

Cooke is one of a group of merchants, businesses and residents who are attempting to solve the puzzle of what to do about the Beach and its declining retail market. On a monthly basis, some of them meet on a Saturday evening to strategize about how to bring the strip back. On a rainy March Saturday, a half-dozen sat down in the Parlour Sa-



Justin Greaves/Metroland



David Nickle/Metroland

It's a tough slog for retailers on what should be the prettiest stretch of Queen Street

lon, to brainstorm some ideas and also ponder the cause of the trouble.

Realtor and lifelong Beach resident Inez Kudruk rejects

the idea that Beach residents are house poor. Many, she says, have been in the area long enough that their houses are paid off or at least their

mortgages are manageable.

"They have equity," she said. "We have to provide really good restaurants. I can't think of one. If we had

"When it comes to shopping locally and supporting locally, the money isn't there,"

- Stephanie Cooke

good restaurants and venues it would be different. But it's hard for them because the rents are so much."

Parlour salon owner Tyler Moore acknowledged that rent is an issue. He also owns a Salon on Ossington Avenue near Queen Street West.

"It's a really hip spot right now, and the rent here is more. And the Ossington location is three times the size," he said. "This is beautiful, I love it, but these are high rents."

The rents are high, and thanks to a City of Toronto tax rebate policy, there is an incentive for landlords to keep them high - and if it comes to that, keep their businesses vacant. If a business property is vacant for more than 90 days, the owner is entitled to a rebate.

Local city Coun. Mary Margaret-McMahon said that the end of the rebate program in July might help - but the core problem is an unwillingness of the local community to patronize local businesses, and also support the kind of change in the neighbourhood that would boost those businesses.

"High rents are a problem but usually people coming in to rent would do a business plan with that in mind," said McMahon. "But people need to be more open to condominium proposals and development applications. Patios are often opposed. So we can't complain about not having a vibrant neighbourhood and not having patios when we vote a certain way, but then go enjoy a patio in Leslieville. There's more we could be doing. But there's no one major solution."

Next: What are some of the ways business and the community can revitalize the ghost town on Queen Street?