

# Downtown Survey Results: What Uxbridge has to say

by Roger Varley

A survey on downtown shopping recently conducted by The Uxbridge Cosmos shows that a number of people are angered by the empty stores lining Brock Street and want the owners of the stores penalized rather than receiving a break on their property taxes.

The survey asked residents to answer nine questions regarding shopping in the Brock Street retail district. Some respondents included lengthy responses to some of the questions, and a few even sent along full-length letters.

Nine people took the time to comment on the empty stores, some quite forcefully.

"Empty stores should be given a reasonable time frame to rent and then be charged extra tax for being empty," said one reply. "They should not be given a tax break and they should be required to improve outward appearance."

But while some called for an end to the break on property taxes extended to the owners of empty stores, one respondent called for the tax relief to be extended, writing: "Cut ALL business property tax by 50% NOW! and watch business flourish for many years to come."

The 2016 Ontario budget gave municipalities a degree of flexibility on giving property tax breaks to the owners of vacant stores.

Overall, downtown parking apparently presents no problems for most Uxbridge residents, and store hours seem to meet their needs adequately. Nevertheless, the survey shows that only a small majority of residents regularly shop in the downtown retail sector.

According to the 87 replies received during the survey, the shopping experience in Uxbridge could be improved by having more special events, expanding the retail area and

It would appear that the majority of respondents want the retail area enlarged, more special events and incentives offered to attract new businesses. The Cosmos' survey did

not suggest how or where the area should be expanded, and none of the respondents offered any thoughts along those lines. Similarly, there were only a couple of suggestions about the types of special events people would like to see. The

majority simply want more offered.

One respondent opined that events held in Elgin Park should include a Brock Street component to attract people to the downtown during these events.

Yet when it came to incentives, it was surprising what respondents considered to be incentives. Of the 79 people who responded that question, 66 took the time to elaborate on what they considered to be "incentives" to shop downtown, and two major themes emerged: the Farmers' Market and the empty stores. Sixteen people said they wanted the market moved from the arena parking lot to a downtown location, seeing it as a boon to downtown merchants. (The Farmers' Market recently announced it will be moving this year to a location next to the Second Wedge Brewery on Victoria Street.)

"I think the Farmers' Market should be downtown," one respondent wrote, "even if it means closing a section of the street. It would promote foot traffic and be so much better for all our mom and pop shops!"

Another respondent felt new businesses are being hampered by township red tape.

"Currently the town has all kinds of obstacles and expenses to set up a business," was the comment.

However, one respondent put the onus directly on the merchants.

"We want to see a vibrant downtown, but the retailers are responsible for the success of their business, not the township," the reader said.

One respondent believed better pedestrian linkage between Glen Acres and the downtown - such as a

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providing township incentives to attract new stores.

Not all respondents answered all nine questions: the number of responses to each question are indicated in parentheses.

On the question of parking (84), 77 per cent said they are not deterred from shopping downtown by parking issues. But 22 per cent said they were.

Regarding store hours (81), 68 per cent said they had no problem with stores' hours of operation, while 32 per cent disagreed.

However, when asked how often they shop downtown (83), only 25 per cent shop there every day. Another 41 per cent shop once a week and 30 per cent shop downtown occasionally. Just four per cent said they never shop downtown.

So what could encourage more shoppers to come downtown more often? On that topic, The Cosmos asked a number of questions.

On expanding the downtown retail area (82), 60 per cent agreed it would be a good idea, while 15 per cent were opposed to the idea. Another 26 per cent had no opinion.

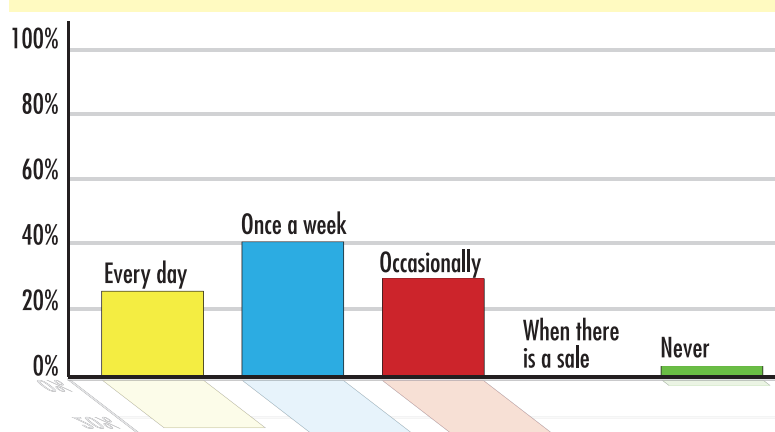
Should there be more special events (83)? A large majority - 77 per cent - think there should be, while only five per cent said no, and 18 per cent had no opinion.

As for the township offering incentives to attract new businesses to the downtown (79), 81 per cent of respondents gave a resounding yes, while 13 per cent said no. Only six per cent had no opinion.



## How often do you shop downtown Uxbridge?

Answered: 83 Skipped: 4



footpath between Jonathan Street and Maple Street - would encourage residents to walk downtown.

A couple of replies touched on snow removal from the downtown.

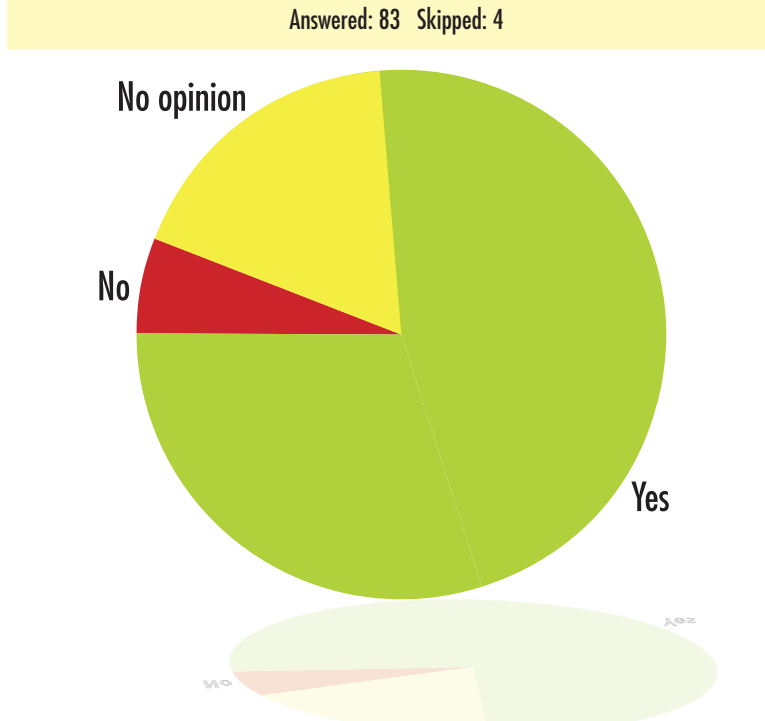
"Snow removal right after storm before traffic gets too busy and when snow piled up (it) becomes difficult to manoeuvre. I am not a mountain goat! (sic)," read one reply.

Other replies about incentives included the need for a hotel/motel, a

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## Would you like to see more special events held in the downtown Uxbridge area?

Answered: 83 Skipped: 4



From November 15, 2016 until February 28, 2017, The Uxbridge Cosmos made a survey available to its readership through the newspaper and through its website (via survey monkey.com). The proprietor of M.T. Hangers, a shop at 8 Brock St. W., also made paper copies of the survey available to customers who visited the store, under her own volition. No names were submitted along with the surveys, so all quotes within are anonymous. Percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number. Any inquiries regarding the survey results should be directed to the publisher of The Uxbridge Cosmos.

## What does Uxbridge want downtown?

Overwhelmingly, respondents said that what is most needed downtown is a grocery store.

The Cosmos asked its readers what type of stores they would like to see in the retail area and 23 said they want a grocery store of some type. One was most adamant. "GROCERY STORE PLEASE!!!" was the all-caps reply.

Interestingly, readers also requested stores that used to be in the retail area but have been replaced by similar operations located in the southern commercial strip, such as a dry cleaner, a dollar store and a pet store.

Other suggestions included stores that sell clothing and shoes for men, women, youth and children, toys and hobbies, antiques and variations on the arts, such as an art gallery, art and craft supplies and a music store. Some

want to see "interesting" boutiques and gift shops. There were calls for an outdoor activities store, a motor scooter or motorcycle retailer and a sports store. More than one respondent touted the need for a store focusing on seniors' needs, and others were more specific in their answers by saying exactly what stores they want to see, naming retailers like Reitman's, Old Navy, Winners, Toys "R" Us and Sobeys.

Some wanted more restaurants such as an Internet café, a family friendly restaurant, a place to have coffee and dessert at night, and even a cat café. A number wanted food diversity, such as Indian, Italian and Greek restaurants. Others, however, were of the opinion the downtown already has enough eateries.

A few responses took the opposite tack, citing what

they did not want to see, such as more nail spas, pizza shops or non-retail ventures like real estate offices and financial services.

One repeated theme was the call for more affordable retail outlets. One comment encapsulated the theme. "Mid-range price retail," it said. "We have high-end and low-end, but not much in between."

That theme seemed to be backed up by the replies to the question: "What businesses in downtown Uxbridge do you most frequently visit?" Seventeen said

they visit MT Hangers, a resale store; and Chances Are, the hospital auxiliary thrift shop. (It should be noted here that the proprietor of MT Hangers handed out photocopies of

The Cosmos survey to her customers and then forwarded the responses to the newspaper. Nevertheless, it does show a considerable number of Uxbridge residents are looking to save money on their purchases.)

"More police presence at night," asked one respondent, adding: "(I) don't feel safe downtown at night." Someone else expressed concern about "the drug addicts (that) hang out" in the downtown area, while another replied: "Honestly I wouldn't feel super comfortable going for a night stroll at night there."

Another popular suggestion might not be so popular with the merchants. There were numerous calls for lower prices and more discounts and promotional events.

"It's a small town, not Yorkville," said one comment.

*"Mid-range price retail, please. We have high-end and low-end, but not much in between."*

*"More police presence at night," said one respondent. "I don't feel safe downtown at night."*

**SURVEY: More on page 8**



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SURVEY: From page 7

# Messages for the merchants - and council

Shoppers responding to The Cosmos survey included several messages for both downtown retailers and Uxbridge council, but topping the list was: clean up your act!

From the 58 comments to the question "What could downtown Uxbridge businesses/retailers do to attract you to their business/store?", the overwhelming suggestion was that store owners take more pride in their businesses' appearance.

Respondents want stores to make their window displays more attractive and

improve the look of their facades. One put it bluntly: "Fewer ratty looking places." The same person also suggested that the empty stores in the area be "camouflaged".

"Attention to storefront charm, pride of ownership," wrote another.

However, some stores came in for praise for the way they look, such as Low's Furniture, Presents, Rutledge Jewelers and Blue Heron Books. At the east end of Brock St., The Meat Merchant and Uxbridge Shoes & Repair received compliments.

One person said store owners

should clean the sidewalks in front of their establishments and work with the township to address the garbage and litter that makes Uxbridge a "dirty little town". That's where the message was expanded to include the township.

One response called for more frequent emptying of the litter receptacles along the street.

*"I was embarrassed at (the) Santa parade with full garbage cans. There is so much garbage and street food around, it is an issue."*

"I was embarrassed at (the) Santa parade with full garbage cans," they wrote. "There is so much garbage and street food around, it is an issue."

Another wrote about being unable to enjoy an ice cream from the Perfect Scoop (which has since closed) last summer because of the smell of garbage.

A number of people called for the beautification of the downtown area with more greenery and flowers, as well as the return of twinkle lights to the trees along Brock Street. One respondent said the decision to remove the lights was "another blight on the Brock Street business area." Another opined that, since the lights came down, Brock Street at night "just



One of the several vacant storefronts that occupy space along Brock St. in Uxbridge.

looks abandoned because most of the shops close by 6 p.m."

But to some, that should not be the end of the township's involvement. A number cited safety and security concerns.

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don't feel safe downtown at night."

Someone else expressed concern about "the drug addicts (that) hang out" in the downtown area, while another replied: "Honestly I wouldn't feel super comfortable going for a night stroll at night there."

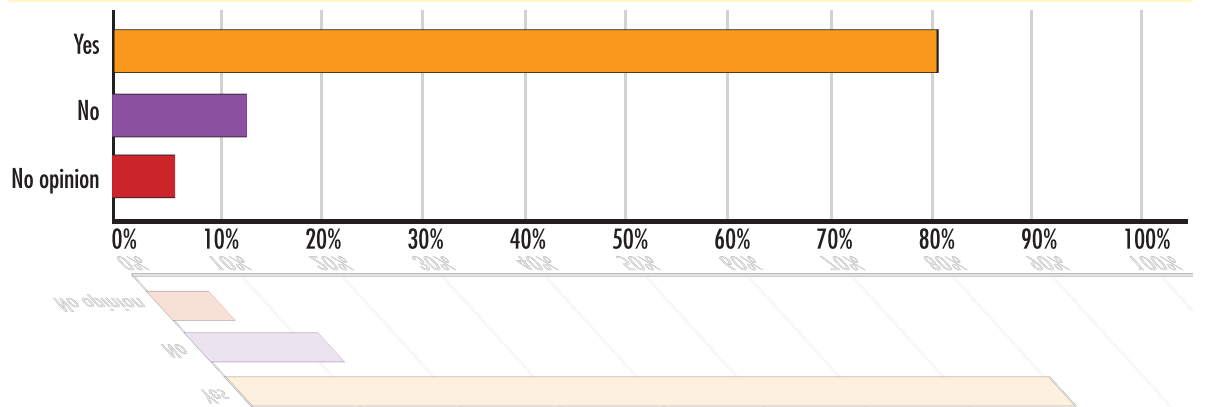
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not be so popular with the merchants. There were numerous calls for lower prices and more discounts and promotional events.

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## Do you think the township should offer incentives to attract new businesses/retailers to the downtown Uxbridge area?

Answered: 79 Skipped: 8



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