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City to spruce up Main Street

Residents want trees, safer walkways

By PAT LEE Staff Reporter

Thu. Jan 10 - 10:39 AM



Coun. Andrew Younger (East Dartmouth - The Lakes) wants to see Main Street become a more user-friendly area. Halifax Regional Municipality will release a consultant's report on how to improve the commercial strip at a public session Monday at 6 p.m. at Stevens Road Baptist Church. (PETER PARSONS / Staff)

DARTMOUTH — When Coun. Andrew Younger was growing up in Dartmouth, he spent a lot of time in the Main Street area, taking music lessons, going bowling or grabbing a sundae at an ice cream shop.

He said back then it was a two-lane thoroughfare that residents felt comfortable walking to and from for shopping or other services.

Now, the stretch of road between the Westphal Plaza and the Akerley Campus of the Nova Scotia Community College is a four-lane strip of road book-ended by highways, making it unsafe and unappealing for those on foot.

"Back in the '80s and '90s the City of Dartmouth widened Main Street and that's when things started to change," Younger said recently at a coffee shop overlooking the busy road. "It became not very walkable."

That's just one of the issues being tackled in a planning process to spruce up the Main Street area — including adjacent Lakecrest and Tacoma drives — culminating in a consultant's report to be revealed in a public meeting on Monday at Stevens Road United Baptist Church.

Another meeting will be held on Wednesday at the Garden View Restaurant for area business owners, designed to discuss if they'd like to form a business improvement district.

Monday's public meeting will kick off with an open house at 6 p.m. and the presentation at 7 p.m.

Younger said they've spent the last year or so talking to the public and businesses to garner their thoughts on how to improve the aging but still vibrant business area.

With the busiest Shoppers Drug Mart in Atlantic Canada on Tacoma Drive, one of the busiest NSLC outlets in the province in the Westphal Plaza and many businesses like Glubes Sound Studio, the Canadian Conservatory of Music and Wacky Wheatleys doing business there for decades, clearly there's still life on the street.

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"Obviously you can make money in this area or they wouldn't have stayed," he said.

But it's a street that's also showing its age, including the Westphal Plaza, owned and anchored by Sobeys, and a district in flux with Canadian Tire recently moving from Tacoma Drive to Dartmouth Crossing.

Younger said when residents were polled about what they would like to see change on the street, their main issue was that it looked and felt like a highway.

"The two biggest things that came up was the lack of trees and that they didn't feel safe walking there. People who live a block away drive to Main Street. They felt that they would be walking on a highway, so it's a perception issue."

Younger said with 43,000 cars a day using Main Street, often as a thoroughfare to outlying communities like Lake Echo or Porters Lake, there is always going to be traffic. But the city will be adopting plans to soften the impact, like planting trees, perhaps bringing buildings closer to the street and putting parking in the back to create less of a highway feel, improved and more decorative lighting and increasing the ratio of residential living along the street.

While the views of residents were taken into consideration, the input of businesses was just as crucial, the councillor said, particularly Sobeys and Plazacorp, which owns the property along Tacoma Drive that housed Canadian Tire and other businesses. He said without their input or support, the exercise would be fruitless.

"There's no point in recommending something that they're not going to do."

Younger said other issues that challenge the area are controversial establishments like a Hooters Restaurant opening soon and Ralph's strip club.

But he said if the area around those businesses is improved, they will fade into the background and not define the street.

Younger said ideally the area will become much more "creative" in its future look and planning process.

"There's a trend in Europe and the States now towards form planning, where you say, 'we just want this block to look like this. Do what you think.'

"So we're looking at making the Main Street area a test case for that. "

(plee@herald.ca)

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