

# THE VALUE OF A BIA

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## INTRODUCTION

- I welcome the chance to talk about one of my planning passions with you
- The February 17, 2017 report “ROI on BIAs” provides a series of useful performance indicators to help measure the value of a BIA
- My focus will be on connecting the dots and on other measures based on my 45 years of observation and interaction with BIA merchants across the City of Toronto and in my own neighbourhood
- People want to know what’s in it for me and for us?
- KEY THEMES:
- Why do BIAs Matter?
- Strategies to Strengthen BIAs
- A Proactive Agenda for the Future

## 1. WHY DO BIA’S MATTER?

- Main Streets are the heart and soul of most neighbourhoods and small towns!
- They are a defining feature of most communities that have stood the test of time
- Toronto Main Streets or Avenues are recognized in the Urban Structure Map of the Official Plan for their significance
- Official Plan designation of “Mixed-Use” with numerous supportive policies to guide development, streetscape improvements and strengthen retail vibrancy
- This is in direct contrast to the planning policies of the 1950’s and 1960’s that promoted the development of shopping plazas and malls
- To stimulate the revitalization of retail strips, Alex Ling championed the 1<sup>st</sup> BIA established in Bloor West Village in 1970 with an initial budget of \$47,500
- There are now 82 BIAs in Toronto representing 40,000 businesses of all sizes and types including industrial BIA’s with 2016 annual budgets ranging from \$ 7K in Dovercourt Village to \$ 3+ million for Bloor-Yorkville
- Total City of Toronto 2016 BIA levy of \$26 million
- Total of 232 BIAs in Ontario
- They celebrate everything local, develop community pride and distinct identities
- They continuously inject financial resources into communities that help to beautify main streets
- Key feature of pooling financial resources to promote and improve BIA’s is common to all; however, one size or one approach doesn’t fit all!

## 2. STRATEGIES TO STRENGTHEN BIAs

### Remove Barriers and Make Connections

- Be a positive force!
- Embrace an aspirational vision not an incremental vision!
- Connect with all elected representatives on a continuous basis and push them hard for concrete support and results
- Develop a strategic vision and action plan, review it every year and update your achievements
- Decide on new priorities and speak with one voice!
- Embrace your local Residents' Association fully and help them to achieve their objectives eg. Beasley Charter Neighbourhood in Hamilton
- Essential to reach out and establish strong working relationship of mutual benefit
- **Danforth East Community Association (DECA)** - developed a proactive strategy with owners of vacant stores to allow temporary pop-up shops and a tool lending library shop to improve their main street-they have a session her tomorrow
- My UofT planning course devoted to developing Vision and Action Plans for Danforth East
- Also jointly sponsored events with the BIA, engaged the community in wish list of community improvements and worked with TTC to revision the Coxwell subway station and re-imagine alternative uses for the Coxwell barns site
- **Weston** - my UofT planning course devoted to developing Vision and Action Plans resulted in the establishment of the Weston Village Residents' Association who along with the BIA and the Weston Community Coalition, secured a stop on the Union Pearson Express train, got the GO tracks lowered through Weston resulting in a new green open space, got a gateway pedestrian overpass built by Metrolinx, championed the redevelopment of new rental housing, a revitalized farmers' market and the establishment of the first Artscape to locate outside of downtown
- BIA Capacity Building Program is a critical first step for distressed retail strips in Neighbourhood Improvement Areas to help with asset mapping, establish connections between businesses and determine if there are enough common interests to establish a BIA

### Up Close and Personal

- Number one attribute of BIA'S is personal service!
- A NON-MALL EXPERIENCE
- Face to face contact is unique experience where merchants know you by name and go out of their way to serve you, build life-long relationships of trust and mutual support

- They function as linear community centres where you are most likely to meet your neighbours
- They are the heart and soul of neighbourhoods and small towns that celebrate local events and festivals
- Preservation of Heritage Buildings instead of just facades is critical to unique appeal of BIA's especially in the downtowns of smaller communities
- One of the best examples found in Collingwood-hosting next year's conference
- Commercial BIA's are primarily places for pedestrians of all ages
- This is especially valued by seniors who often depend on walking to local pharmacies, restaurants and shops
- Accessibility and the quality of the pedestrian experience are key
- Baby boomer generation (1945-1966) now entering their 70's
- Important to embrace an 8-80 city building mindset so the city works for those under 10 years of age and those over 80
- Next 20 years will bring a demand for different housing choices that all can be accommodated on Main Streets

### **Experimentation and Pilot Projects**

- Willingness to try new ideas and approaches-find a reason why it will work!
- Collaboration is not about gluing together old ideas. It's about the ideas that never existed!
- Yonge Street pedestrian Mall in 1971, Yonge Street temporary sidewalk cafes in 2014
- Current "Yonge Love" options for pedestrians/transit/vehicle use of road being studied by Downtown Yonge BIA
- Re-think how best to use the available road space to maximize people movement
- On King Street, cars take up 60% of the road space but only carry 16% of the people
- Redesign options now being considered to expand the public realm by widening the sidewalks, dramatically improve streetcar service and enhance business
- **Mount Dennis BIA** - short and long term perspective strategy with a close working relationship with local residents association and BIA beginning to show results on a budget of only \$18,000
- Create new interest and pedestrian traffic/shipping container brought in over the Xmas holiday period to sell Drake General Store merchandise
- Long term potential of major revitalization when Eglinton Crosstown LRT opens with connections to GO and UP Express
- Belleville, Ontario - establishment of Downtown Doc Fest featuring a weekend of unique documentary films, revival of a major old movie theatre,

partnerships with the BIA and restaurants have injected new life into the potential of downtown and attracted patrons from other cities

- Vancouver - mixed use Home Depot, small shops and housing on Cambie Street
- Quebec City Lanterns on Avenue Cartier
- Emery Village BIA - huge geographic area in a suburban industrial context/initial idea of Canada's tallest flagpole/reference to Viagra to sponsor!
- Wynwood Walls Miami - establishment of a totally new vibrant arts district of numerous blocks north of downtown by concentrating murals on all walls of industrial buildings has resulted in growth of a flourishing district with new restaurants, shops, condominiums and a hotel

### **Urban Acupuncture and Place Making**

- Need to identify key spots where public investment will create new energy, public life and amenities/What are you doing to fix your city and your community?
- Appeal to your senses of see, feel, touch
- Numerous examples include: Berczy Park, St. George Street, transformation of Queen's Quay, conversion of Yorkville parking lot into Cumberland Park public space capturing Canadian landscape, giving priority to transit on King Street, curbsless Market Street next to St. Lawrence Market, Gould Street on Ryerson Campus, Wave Decks and Canada's Sugar Beach on Waterfront
- Small initiatives such as the conversion of former traffic merge lane at Yonge and Roxborough to public space at strategic locations can make a difference
- New York City - temporary conversion of road space in NYC for public use resulted in better traffic management and a variety of much needed public space in Times Square and many neighbourhoods throughout the city
- Recognize that the main street and public amenities is the front yard for many condo residents who often do not have outdoor amenity space
- Public art installations, murals and other visual features of the local community help to inject life and special interest eg. Liberty Village
- Mary Rowe, Senior Fellow, Project for Public Space "own it, prove it, tell it, share it, curate it, connect it, sell it, pitch it, invest in it"
- Each BIA should undertake an inventory of urban acupuncture opportunities with the local resident associations and identify a prime candidate for conversion to public space

### **3. A PROACTIVE AGENDA FOR THE FUTURE**

#### **Understanding and Embracing Change**

- Don't look in the rear view mirror when designing the future!
- Most people don't like change so must show them how change can benefit their daily life and their community

- Bad place (anger and frustration), Worse Place (continue to embrace the past), Better Place (new reality and new perspective)
- Important to plan in recognition of the market forces and emerging economy not against it to help achieve your objectives
- Establish an excellent working relationship with local area city planners to stay on top of city-wide and local development, planning studies and projected capital projects
- Toronto is experiencing unprecedented growth in both population and employment with a record number of development applications
- 2016 “How Does the City Grow” Toronto research publication indicates 40% of all new development city-wide is occurring in the downtown core but 23% is happening on main streets in the form of mid-rise mixed-use projects, the vast majority of which are located in BIA’s
- Lack of affordable housing and the growing rich-poor gap is a top priority issue for young people, families and seniors especially in Toronto and Vancouver
- People who make the city function unable to find housing choices
- Adoption of inclusionary zoning in big cities to become more common where a percentage of housing in all developments is dedicated to affordable housing
- Young people with skills and talent relocating to medium size cities and smaller communities which are affordable eg. Hamilton Arts Community
- Main Streets can accommodate much of this need with housing of all types built over stores eg. Shoppers Drug Mart, LCBO etc.
- Mid-rise is market with huge potential for all ages and all types of units suitable for singles and families
- 2002 Flashforward Toronto Planning Study projected population and Employment to 2031
- 15,775 properties in 160 km of Avenues zoned CR/building on only 10% of these properties at 6 stories(retail and 5 residential) generated 124,000 units of new housing
- A win-win concept that generates more customers, supports existing surface transit and provides a variety of both ownership and rental housing options
- Seek out creative developers who share your agenda for positive change, identify sites you want to see redeveloped and invite them into your BIA
- Essential for BIA’S to work proactively with developers who want to build on main streets and monitor the demographic composition and preferences of new residents
- Many examples of proactive city planning: creation of innovative King-Spadina and King-Parliament Secondary Plans in 1996, redevelopment of Honest Ed’s and Mirvish Village into a diverse mixed-use project with rental housing and small shops, TO core-creating a new network of public spaces with possible closure of portions of Yonge Street for pedestrians, bike lanes on Bloor

## **PROACTIVE AGENDA FOR THE FUTURE**

### **Drive-Thru Prohibitions**

- Foot traffic matters more than car traffic!
- In 2003, McDonald's planned to convert an existing walk-in restaurant on St. Clair Avenue West into a drive-thru facility
- Numerous other proposals were made throughout the city for drive-thru banks, cleaners and other uses
- The drive-thru mindset has taken over in the U.S. with drive-thru liquor stores and even funeral parlours!
- The negative impact of these drive-thru uses would totally change the prevailing character of Toronto's main streets from a place for pedestrians to a place for cars, would destroy the continuity of the building storefronts, conflict with pedestrian safety, add to the pollution of idling vehicles, create traffic conflicts at entrances and exits and would threaten the stability of the adjacent residential neighbourhoods
- After a city planning study, I recommended a city-wide prohibition of all drive-thru uses within 30 metres of a residential district except within industrial districts
- After much debate, this recommendation was adopted by city council
- The By-law was challenged by a long list of leading lawyers at the OMB but the By-law upheld the by-law and the prohibition became a model for other cities

### **City Planning Studies and Zoning Changes**

- Initiating city planning studies of local BIA's that result in zoning changes to reinforce small merchants
- Restrictions on a mix of store bay widths within a new development over a certain size would make provision for one large store and several smaller stores
- Would help to help encourage independent merchants who could afford rent levels and discourage chain stores from dominating an entire block eg. Honest Ed's
- Imposition of controls on number of restaurants permitted within a geographic area and restrictions on franchises to help encourage a diversity of uses
- Adoption of Inclusionary Zoning where a fixed percentage of housing in all new development projects over a certain size is dedicated to affordable housing

## **Digital Main Street**

- Toronto and TABIA launched 'Digital Main Street' initiative in 2016 to help get small merchants connected on line
- Importance of social media and a web presence for customers to search and order merchandise directly
- Recognition that Wi Fi availability for shoppers in the BIA

## **Dispelling Myths about Too Far to Walk**

- On and off street parking is important for BIA'S but it should not dominate the agenda or be an excuse for inaction
- Essential to compare the walking distance of a shopper who parks at the outer edge of mall surface lots, walks through the mall and back to their car with the BIA shopper who parks on a BIA main street and walks the length of the BIA
- It is also useful to consider the inventory of off street parking lots and on street spaces along all side streets within the same distance
- Distance from the outer edge of Yorkdale and Dufferin Mall parking to mall entrance is 500 feet or 50 metres
- Internal length of Dufferin Mall is 1,000 feet or 200 metres/ total walking distance back to your car of 3,000 feet or 600 metres
- Internal perimeter of Yorkdale Mall is 3,000 feet or 600 metres/total distance back to your car is 4,000 feet or 800 metres
- Total length of Yonge-Lawrence BIA is 800 metres; total length of Uptown Yonge BIA is 700 metres
- This simple comparison illustrates that the mall shopper often walks more than the BIA shopper but the perception is the opposite!

## **Price Comparison**

- Most people believe that they can only get the best price or a bargain in a mall
- As a young neighbourhood planner working in North Toronto, I undertook a price comparison survey of standard brand items that people use each day and compared the prices in local BIA shops with those in stores in Yorkdale and the Yonge-Eglinton Centre
- Despite the common perception that small merchants can't compete, the results illustrated that prices were similar if not cheaper in the BIA than in the mall
- This result was widely publicized and resulted in my first appearance on CBC
- It would be very instrumental to conduct a similar survey today as I suspect it would open many eyes and help to dispel another myth about small merchants
- TABIA and OBIAA should take this on

## **Transformation of Shopping Plazas and Malls**

- Recognize that older shopping plazas and malls are now in the process of mixed-use redevelopment and intensification eg. Don Mills, Dufferin Mall, the Galleria, Sunnybrook Plaza at Bayview and Eglinton, Bloor-Dundas Loblaws etc.
- There is actually a movement in the U.S. called “Dead Malls” that targets alternative uses for vacant and abandoned plazas and malls
- Redevelopment of these areas represent a massive land supply that can accommodate a range of mixed commercial-residential development to help strengthen retail strips

## **Financial and Political Policy**

- Most small merchants are willing to pay a fair levy if they get something in return
- However, existing Vacant Commercial and Industrial Tax Relief Program gave major tax benefits to store owners who kept properties vacant acting as a continuous disincentive to promote new businesses
- Former Ridpath’s Furniture store on Yonge north of Davenport has remained empty for past several years despite a prime location across the street from Canadian Tire and an attractive heritage facade
- Policy soon to be changed should act as an incentive to seek new tenants and attract new businesses
- Time will tell if removal of this tax benefit will result in fewer vacancies or not
- Upcoming 2018 municipal election and 2018 Ontario election represents an opportunity for BIA’s to develop a priority wish list of legislative changes
- Problems with current Market Value Assessment system which only looks at similar values on precedent new development projects and assigns massive property tax increases to neighbouring buildings that threaten their viability eg. 401 Richmond Street West
- Ontario residential rent control only covers units built before 1991/landlords now doubling rents to cash in on Toronto market exacerbating the housing crisis
- Commercial rent control for small retail operations?

## **BOTTOM LINE AND LESSONS LEARNED**

- SPEAK WITH ONE VOICE!
- FOCUS ON PERSONAL SERVICE!
- MAKE PASSIONATE LOVE TO YOUR COMMUNITY!