

What happens when stores get bigger?

By Ben Bennett

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It's about 21 months or so since our city council decided to go ahead with a major review of its commercial policy. There have been some pretty big changes to the landscape in that time, but all indications are that it intends to push ahead. A public meeting is set for March 13.

There has been almost universal opposition from Guelph residents to the main thrust of the commercial policy -- the concentration of most new retail space into four power centres on the edge of the city. And there has been almost universal support from the developers.

No one should be surprised by this.

The 30-odd per cent of us that bothered to turn out in the municipal election just over two years ago voted for a pro-development council. Development means jobs and taxes and these things are good for the city and its citizens. Or so the story goes.

There is something to this theory -- or at least there was. There are, however, a growing number of people who aren't so sure, nowadays. But most on city council still feel this way and they have their hands on the rudder.

If we look around Guelph today, the big picture is much different from what it was in May 2004 when the green light was given for open season for new retail. The city is losing two of its major employers in the north end. When ABB and Imperial Tobacco close down this year the city will lose 1,000 jobs and Woodlawn Road will become a dead zone. To offset the job and tax loss we have a new Home Depot next door -- a store that just lost a huge chunk of its drive-by traffic -- and maybe a Wal-Mart, whose developers may be beginning to wonder why that corner is so special. It is likely most people will still drive there from central and north Guelph, if not necessarily from south Guelph. The level of traffic on Woolwich Street will increase substantially and adjoining neighbourhoods can look forward to more cut-through traffic, leading to even more calls for traffic calming. And if that development expands to a major power centre of several hundred thousand square feet, as is planned, it will be even worse.

The beauty of our existing Official Plan is that it puts the shopping where the people live. It sounds pretty simple and it is. This approach not only makes sense from the point of view of fairness, it also fosters community and reduces vehicle use, which in turn reduces pollution, road congestion and accidents. Not everyone can afford the time and cost of crossing the city to buy groceries, and not everyone has the physical capacity to do so either.

The scary thing about the trend towards bigger stores is the concurrent trend towards fewer stores in fewer locations, usually on the edge of the city or in some other remote location where land is cheaper. If you are a developer this trend is great news. There is not much money to be made from small stores in small centres, but lots to be made from developing new ones.

And boy, have those stores grown.

Five years ago or so the largest grocery store in Guelph was about 50,000-square feet; most were somewhat smaller. Zehrs on Eramosa Road for example, would be about 40,000-square feet. They have everything there -- everything in the way of groceries, that is. Since then the trend has been to larger formats. There is little more in the way of groceries but all the patio furniture, kids' clothing and particle board furniture you could ask for. The new west end Zehrs is almost 100,000-square feet. The proposed Zehrs at Clair Road and Gordon Street that council approved recently will be 150,000-square feet -- that's even bigger than the Wal-Mart proposed for Woodlawn Road and Woolwich Street. The new east end Zehrs will also be a monster if they get half a chance. And the proposed Commercial Policy Review our council is pushing through is just what they need.

How long will the Eramosa Road Zehrs last if that goes in -- particularly if the Zellers next door closes. If the new owner of the Hudson's Bay Co. sells off the Zellers stores to Target, as predicted, there is no way the U.S. rival to Wal-Mart will keep three stores in this city. When the Clair and Gordon mega store goes ahead, we can likely count the days before the Hartsland Zehrs closes, a point raised by several people at a recent council meeting. That places the entire Kortright shopping centre in jeopardy. Would you open a store there?

As in the north end, the level of traffic on Gordon Street will increase substantially and adjoining neighbourhoods can look forward to more cut-through traffic, leading to even more calls for traffic calming. And yet if you drive around Guelph you can see such possibilities.

The moving of the Home Hardware store away from Woodlawn Road to the former Darrigos plaza at Grange and Victoria roads could see the transformation of that shopping node to a true community centre. If they could get a small grocery store in there just think what that would do for the neighbourhood.

The new housing at the north end of Victoria Road could provide enough of a demand for the return of a small grocery store to the corner of Woodlawn Road. There used to be a Zehrs there but it was closed, as was the store at Woodlawn Road and Woolwich Street. These were decisions made by the head offices of Loblaws, parent company of Zehrs. But if we do nothing to stop this trend toward larger stores we will see more of this, and who will be to blame?

Council can have a major impact on the future of retail -- and community -- in this city next month. Keep your eyes open. The future feel of our city is at stake.

Ben Bennett represented Residents for Sustainable Development at the Ontario Municipal Board, trying to stop Wal-Mart from building a store at the corner of Woodlawn Road and Woolwich Street.