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THE SAULT STAR



Summer street closures would help pave way for downtown prosperity: Shoemaker

Downtown Association not in favour of full weekend closures

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Street party on Queen Street East outside GFL Memorial Gardens before Soo Greyhounds play North Bay Nugget in Sault Ste. Marie, Ont., on Saturday, Sept. 22, 2018. (BRIAN KELLY/THE SAULT STAR/POSTMEDIA NETWORK)

Take 2.

Coun. Matthew Shoemaker is penning a new resolution that he hopes will see city staff develop a plan that will see the downtown closed to traffic on summer weekends.

The concept was first raised in a resolution passed by city council about five years ago, but the report was just returned to council Monday with the recommendation that the streets not be closed at this time. That recommendation is based on correspondence and concerns raised from the Downtown Association, the current pandemic and pause on programming and gathering limits and the costs and volunteers that would be required to close the downtown on weekends.

The report did not satisfy Shoemaker, who charged that city staff passed off the decision to the Downtown Association, something that should not have been done because it is the city that owns the street, not the BIA.

But Downtown Association executive director Salvadore Marchese told The Sault Star Tuesday that while there is support for street closures, the association's membership is not in favour of full weekend closures and there are too many questions and issues that need to be addressed before that support can be wholeheartedly provided.

Marchese said the city's letter was initially voted down at the last annual general meeting, but a discussion followed, suggesting the idea might work one day a week – not all weekend long.

The issue, Marchese said, is that the Downtown Association does not have the budget nor the manpower capacity for the work required to close Queen Street to vehicular traffic and staff it accordingly.

"I reiterate that we are not against the concept but we need answers to our questions," he said.

Marchese said the Downtown Association is willing to discuss the issue with the city and determine where it can lay the foundation for such a project and be ready to roll once the COVID-19 pandemic is behind us.

"We need to look at the framework and then decide if it is beneficial to our members," he said. "But we don't have the ability to do it ourselves."

Shoemaker was upset that it took so long for the report to come back to council and was even more disappointed that his idea is not moving forward.

Wardmate Donna Hilsinger said staff needs to work with the association to discuss and get past the obstacles if the closure is going to happen.

Ward 1 Coun. Paul Christian suggested initial planning for street closures can take place now and the city can be ready to implement them when the pandemic is over and it is safe to do so.

But CAO Malcolm White cautioned that the city isn't directly responsible for Downtown Association programming. However, the association is the strongest entity to partner with on the initiative.

Ward 2 Coun. Lisa Vezeau-Allen, a member of the association's board, said some small independent businesses are not in favour of the street closures, and patrons during the recent Midnight Magic event indicated they would have liked the street open because the weather was not great and they would have preferred to drive between the different blocks.

Shoemaker argues that the city should be in control of the events, not the Downtown Association.

"I have said it before: if we are serious about reviving the downtown, we need to be serious about having a more substantial role in planning and hosting events," he said.

In 2014-2015 there was a move afoot to disband the Downtown Association by repealing the bylaw that permits the association to operate. That movement failed when campaign organizers were unable to obtain enough support to represent at least 50 per cent of the taxpayers in the area.

In the end, organizers said their goal was to get a fair levy and restructure the association to better represent those it represented.

Shoemaker said he believes it failed because there was no alternative presented to the business owners in the area.

"My solution is to maintain a downtown board to have a voice in operating the downtown, but have the city absorb the costs and change how it is funded. If the city brought that role in-house, then businesses can potentially save several thousands of dollars in levy but still maintain a voice," he said.