

SAULT STE. MARIE

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## Open-ended resolution driven to create downtown event calendar

*Coun. Matthew Shoemaker said he believes a plan from council's perspective is important to help the downtown.*

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Downtown Street Party on Queen Street East like this one is what council wants to see more of.

Matthew Shoemaker is pushing forward with his request to see more downtown events.

Several years ago he asked city staff to develop a plan that would see the downtown closed to traffic on summer weekends, and transform to become an event-based space, perhaps in partnership with the Downtown Association.

In January, council received a report with a staff recommendation that the streets not be closed at this time. That recommendation was based on concerns identified by the Downtown Association about who would run and pay for the events. There were also concerns that the pandemic has paused programming due to gathering limits.

On Monday, the Ward 3 councillor penned a new resolution directing staff to

develop a plan that would activate the downtown for additional events.

Shoemaker said he's kept the wording of the motion loose and flexible, allowing staff to develop a plan they believe would be a good fit for the city's downtown.

That plan may involve street closures, or it may not.

It may include every summer weekend, it may not.

It may focus on the Downtown Plaza, or perhaps elsewhere in the downtown core.

It can include other outside organizations who have developed events to be held in the downtown.

The important part, Shoemaker stressed during Monday's city council meeting, is that the City of Sault Ste. Marie should develop the plan and own the plan, by working with the Downtown Association and other stakeholders.

Shoemaker said he believes a plan from council's perspective is important to help the downtown.

His wardmate Donna Hilsinger, who seconded the motion, called it a tremendous opportunity with the development of the Downtown Plaza, recent new private investment in the downtown and a chance to grow the city's cultural vitality.

"This is another step in cultural vitality. I know this can be figured out," Hilsinger said. "It's a great opportunity. Let's see what we can make out of it."

The January 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.

Following that council meeting, Downtown Association executive director Salvatore Marchese told The Sault Star 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 support for the concept can be wholeheartedly provided.

He said the Downtown Association does not have the budget, nor the manpower, for the work required to close Queen Street to vehicular traffic and staff it accordingly.

Ward 2 Coun. Lisa Vezeau-Allen, a member of the Downtown Association board of directors, said the missing piece of the puzzle is downtown business owners.

“The downtown is very much a combination of business owners, of building owners, leasehold people and a variety of businesses,” said the lone opponent of the resolution.

Vezeau-Allen said she can’t support the motion as written because it doesn’t include input from business owners or downtown residents and council knows there is some opposition, including concerns about noise and street closures from those who live there.

She said not all business owners are in favor of closing Queen Street or hosting regular weekend events.

Ward 4 Coun. Rick Niro said it is important to ensure that event organizers are included in the plan, like for instance, the Queen Street Cruise, which needs Queen Street to be open, but perhaps side streets closed, in order to run its event and bring more people downtown.

He also noted some organized events have full calendars, not only for Sault Ste. Marie, but for other communities and their schedules must be considered or accommodated.

Niro noted events planned by other stakeholders have brought people downtown, and must be included in the planning.

Mayor Christian Provenzano said he expects a natural activation of the downtown to populate the calendar, especially those annual events that have occurred for years, including long-standing events like Rotary Fest, the Santa Claus Parade and the annual tree lighting ceremony, among others.

Community development and enterprise services deputy CAO Tom Vair said his staff has already started assembling a downtown event list, partly to activate the proposed Downtown Plaza, and the downtown core.

Vair said brainstorming has already been occurring to discuss events for the plaza and the Downtown Association is working with the city on taking inventory of the events already planned.

“We want to activate that place as much as we possibly can to make it a successful space,” he said.

The Mill Market will also be included in the plan as its relocation also occurs in the downtown somewhere in the future.

Vair said the resolution aligns with what staff are working on now.