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## **Downtown Almonte: forget the siege mentality and focus on success**

*By Nathan Rudyk*

Depending on who's making the observation, "urban Mississippi Mills" in the form of downtown Almonte is either under economic siege or in the midst of an exciting entrepreneurial renaissance.

The siege-sayers blame commuter culture (most of Almonte's citizens do in fact work out of town), strip mall development, and an unwillingness by the area's residents to support local merchants by "shopping local". They say the downtown's going to hell as evidenced by empty storefronts, politicians and planners who don't care, and that it's only going to get worse.

They mourn for a 1950s version of main street where people made a living selling shirts, shoes, groceries and gifts to each other – a world that was decidedly overtaken by multi-national corporations offering gigantic economies of scale and e-commerce convenience that only the most clever and determined "mom and pop" shops can match.

I'm in the renaissance camp. A year-and-a-half ago I decided to chuck the commuter grind and locate a business (my third start-up) in downtown Almonte. It now employs four other local people and a string of freelance talent servicing the product launch and publicity needs of high-tech, financial and government clients in the U.S., Toronto, Ottawa and nearby Perth.

What I've seen in the last 18 months is a healthy acceleration of a trend that started more than a decade ago when developer Stephen Brathwaite and investor Greg Smith began transforming the stony ruins of the Victoria Woollen Mill into what is now a mixed use home for several technology firms, creative companies, professional services organizations, a fabulous restaurant, and more. (Brathwaite, as many people know, was a catalyst for several other smart heritage developments in downtown Almonte.)

## ***Renaissance in action***

On our floor in that same mill, three new offices were filled in just the last few months with a software company, a stockbroker, a property assessment firm and a wedding planning outfit. There's similar action when you head up Mill Street. In the last few years Almonte became home to several more innovative businesses producing computer animation, landscape design, medical technology, behavioural software, facility planning, numismatics, furniture and sculpture. In turn, those businesses are attracting support services such as cleaning staff, gardeners, carpenters, graphic artists, legal and accounting help.

Siege-sayers take note: The 21st century version of downtown Almonte has taken firm root. It's growing a new generation of businesses that employ college and university graduates, pay excellent wages, and offer Mississippi Mills a vibrant, prosperous future.

## ***The future at work today***

Here is a small day-in-the-life example of what's happening: On a recent fine fall afternoon on the Ironworks' patio overlooking the town's splendid River Walk, my business partner Steve Reside and I were planning a new marketing campaign for an Arizona tech company when we were joined by Steve McNally, President of FrontLines.

McNally told us how his online support software was recently adopted by more than a half dozen new U.S. manufacturing customers including Panasonic and Emerson Electric, and that he was poised to expand his business. A few tables over Peter Egan, President of S4Potential, and his business partner, Dr. William Winogron, were conducting a meeting with some of their colleagues to maximize the potential of cutting-edge multi-media programs designed to help with autism support, anger management, substance abuse and employee engagement. Their opportunity is global.

Just as we were paying our cheque, Dr. Michael Caughey, one of high-tech Ottawa's most revered entrepreneurs and now an Almonte resident, stopped by to tell us about his next TEA (Technology Entrepreneurs of Almonte) Party – a monthly, invitation-only event that attracts several dozen entrepreneurs, venture capitalists, and angel financiers from both inside and far outside the borders of our town. And no, we don't actually drink tea at these shindigs. Most of us drink beer and share both our successes and failures as we work to build our companies in Almonte.

Can more be done to help our downtown? Absolutely. First we have to drop the notion that we can or should try to resurrect a 1950s version of main street, and understand the promise of what's going on under our noses.

It's easy to spend taxpayer dollars on more benches and flowers, but what about installing inexpensive hi-speed wireless Internet services on both Pakenham's and Almonte's main streets, following the lead of San Francisco, Toronto and Ottawa's Elgin Street?

## ***What next?***

It's easy to spend millions on infrastructure projects like roundabouts and sewage facilities, but what about calling an urgent meeting with our 21st century movers and shakers to set in motion targeted funding for programs, such as:

- employee training grants for new downtown hires tied to new 21st century skills (it's all about people, not buildings, really it is)
- leasehold and rental incentives to fill the empty storefronts (the people do after all need somewhere to work, so it is about buildings to a lesser extent)
- recruitment efforts in crowded, overpriced, overtaxed Kanata to attract a minimum of a dozen more businesses over the next year (a realistic target given there are hundreds of tech companies there)
- a day-long mandatory tour for all town councillors of the 10 most recent downtown businesses so the politicians can appreciate why the businesses came, and how to attract more of them (because it's all about people)

Good luck to everyone who's running in the upcoming municipal election. For the winners, we have a downtown brimming with opportunity, ideas and optimism and would love to include you in our success story.

*Nathan Rudyk is President of market2world communications inc., a business proud to be located in downtown Almonte.*

The MMRA Board has reviewed the election 2006 bulletin articles for factual accuracy. The bulletins, and the opinions represented within them, are meant to stimulate community discussion and awareness in the time period leading up to the 2006 municipal elections in Mississippi Mills. Your vote counts!

The MMRA is a non-profit residents' association. For more information on the MMRA or to join, visit our web site at [www.mmra.ca](http://www.mmra.ca).