

Thorold Heritage Advisory Committee

In Defense of Downtown Cultural and Economic Sustainability: Impact Statement Regarding the Proposed McDonald's at the Corner of Pine and Sullivan

We know that the contents of this statement will not be popular. We also understand that the above-mentioned proposal was approved by Council. Despite this we feel it is imperative to point out the adverse impact of this project if it goes ahead as planned. In addition, we would like to clarify that though blunt, this statement does not intend to attack, but to offer a different perspective.

The proposed development involves a typical McDonald's outlet, with a drive-through and a parking lot making up most of the site. The lot in question sits at a busy intersection, in the middle of our historic downtown, with a public school directly across the street. There are various reasons why this project is a bad idea. Apart from youth nutritional health and the safety of students who will inevitably flock across busy Sullivan Avenue to get their lunch, the drive-through will not only be an eyesore, but a considerable contributor to both traffic congestion and air pollution. These are issues that will affect us all, not just heritage. But heritage itself, and with it the character and identity of our city, as well as the local businesses which make it thrive, will also be negatively affected.

The proposed building site is located along Towpath, an area of major historic and heritage significance in the City of Thorold. This was once the industrial heart of the city, the source of its success, growth, and wealth due to the Welland Canal and the local enterprises and industries

which thrived alongside it. Though Towpath looks like nothing much since the canal's infill in the late 50s and 60s, the numerous designated and un-designated heritage sites in its vicinity bear witness to its historic importance. Directly at its northern end, and within viewing distance of the proposed McDonalds site, lies one of our most spectacular heritage sites, the Old Firehall, with Welland Mills immediately behind it. Diagonally across Pine Street is Trinity United Church, 170 years old and designated under the heritage act, and as mentioned, there is a school directly across Sullivan, which has heritage significance as well. Also along Towpath, lies the soon to be former 'New' Firehall, which will hopefully be the site of a much anticipated and long overdue museum for Thorold, and immediately parallel runs our historic Front Street with its several designated buildings, its independent shops, and its banners proudly commemorating the 'Prince of Wales' heritage award the city earned in 2017. The Battle of Beaverdams Park, diagonally across Sullivan from the proposed McDonald's, has recently been beautifully updated, and contains numerous historic artefacts and monuments relating to Thorold's history and the pivotal Battle of Beaverdams in the War of 1812, as well as the designated Lock 25 of the 2nd Welland Canal. The entire area along the former canals, including Towpath, represent a cultural heritage landscape, or townscape, if you will, and in the City of Thorold's Parks, Trails, and Recreation Master Plan, was intended to be developed as part of a linear park that runs north-south along the former Welland Canals, terminating in the updated Battle of Beaverdams Park. The Downtown Thorold Development Guidelines provide direction for commercial, mixed-use and public areas in the downtown, with a strong focus on preserving heritage and character in redevelopments and new developments, and with parking areas that are attractive and comfortable.

None of the McDonald's outlets in the neighbouring cities are located in such neighbourhoods.

They are where they should be, along highways, in commercial subdivisions, or in malls. A fast-

food supplier like McDonald's is a pit-stop, not a destination, and while there is a need and a desire for such establishments, they do not belong in a historic downtown centre. Surely there must be other sites in Thorold where a McDonald's would fulfill its purpose equally well without the negative impact on our downtown and the local businesses trying to make a living there.

The exaggerated convenience of businesses like McDonald's, and especially the drive-through concept, will endanger our independent businesses, businesses which do not only help to preserve the unique character and the identity of our city, but are so important to its economic success by attracting visitors and new residents. The suggestion that the project will draw people to our downtown who will then proceed to support our local businesses is ludicrous. The drive-through will ensure that they don't even have to leave their car while their exhaust fumes pollute our downtown air.

The development will not be a tourism asset, either. Tourists stop at McDonald's when on the road. While visiting a historic town, they prefer characterful pubs and quaint cafés. While a McDonald's might fulfill the occasional need for convenience, it will make a negative impression on visitors who expect an authentic downtown vibe. Travellers who are waiting at our bus terminal should be focussing on all the unique assets Thorold has to offer, not on something that is reminiscent of an access highway intersection.

The physical aspects of the project will of course be largely to blame for this. The proposed building is of cookie-cutter corporate design, a one-story strip mall concept which is entirely contradictory to our present push for downtown intensification. Whatever happened to our need for housing, which our government is so ready to sacrifice our heritage and our greenbelt for? This lot seems ideal for a mixed-use development with much-needed accommodation on the upper floors. A substantial, well-designed building would contribute to restoring the once

thriving character of the immediate surroundings, reinstating the area to its former significance when the canal ran through the heart of the city, paying homage to its industrial past reinvented according to contemporary needs. Even a McDonald's on the commercial first floor would be acceptable, if it involved the product only. But nothing will be added to Thorold's appeal, local economy, and housing situation by space-wasting corporate outlets with their in-your-face presence, and with their drive-throughs, which frankly are an outdated, car-centric mid-twentieth century dinosaur detrimental to our health and our environment.

As mentioned, we are aware that the deal is approved. We also know that many residents welcome the addition. It is not necessary, however, for this new addition to be located right in the middle of town. If there truly were no other possible location for this McDonald's, then incorporating it into a proper development, eliminating the drive-through, and landscaping the parking-lot as laid out in the master plan, would give our city and our local businesses a fair chance at success and regeneration.

If no change to this proposal is possible any more, we urge you to not let this become a precedent, and Towpath – or other parts of our historic centre – a line-up of fast-food chains and similar venues. Our city's downtown – any city's downtown – is its heart and its soul, not a service centre promoting the generic outposts of giant corporations.