

# Downtown BIA bringing new life, investments to the Queen Street district in Niagara Falls

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For many generations of Niagara Falls residents, Queen Street was always the place to be—whether it was trying out scout uniforms in the basement of Rosberg’s, buying a handful of penny candy at Gold’s Variety or catching a lazy matinee at the Seneca Theatre or the Capitol. And like many of Ontario’s old downtowns, times change. Storefronts become faded and worn. People move on.

But according to Nemanja Kuntos, general manager of the Downtown Business Improvement Area (BIA), there’s no reason why they can’t bring back the glory days of Queen Street once again.

“We want Queen Street to be the place for people to eat, shop and explore,” he says. “We have a number of new directors on board this year that are really committed to making things happen.”

Having recently rebranded Queen Street as “The Q” district, the Downtown BIA is currently launching several initiatives aimed at reducing current vacancies and encouraging investment in the downtown core.

Right now, Queen Street has a number of units available for sale or lease with commercial space ranging from 500 to 17,000 square feet in size. They have several inexpensive leasing rates—all starting at just \$6 per square foot. The Downtown BIA can also help new business owners tap into the City of Niagara Falls’ Community Improvement Plans which offer a variety of grant and loan programs.

Much of the renewed activity on Queen Street stems from the recent change in the state of the local real estate market. Since 2003, many of Queen Street’s downtown properties were owned by Historic Niagara Developments Inc.—a group of American investors that had been subsidizing the area after their plans to launch a new shopping and theatre project fell through in 2007.

This past March, however, Historic Niagara sold its 100 commercial and residential properties to Thorold’s Keefer Developments. Headed by Phil Ritchie, a local land developer and entrepreneur, Keefer Development has had great success with several revitalization projects, redeveloping such Thorold properties as Welland Mills, the Keefer Mansion Inn, and the one-time Gallaher paper mill. Ritchie’s work in recent years has gone a long way to help bring new life to Thorold’s aging downtown core.



Nemanja is hoping Keefer Developments can work some similar magic with downtown Queen Street.

“Phil is focused on helping us bring more people downtown,” he says. “The tourist market is great—but we can’t depend on that like we have in the past. We’re more concerned with attracting local residents back to the area.”

Nemanja says they can accomplish that by attracting local tenants with affordable rents, and selling buildings to hands-on entrepreneurs that are willing to bring new ideas and new variety to the Queen Street area. The Downtown BIA is also hoping to attract more people by renovating and adding new residential developments.

“Residency is key for us,” he says. “We feel that will really help us bring more of a local flavour back to the downtown.”

Local residents that haven’t been to the Queen Street area recently will be surprised to see some of the many updates that have taken place along the main thoroughfare. Over the past year, the City of Niagara Falls has spent over \$3-million on infrastructure and beautification improvements such as adding brand new sidewalks, new street signage and large wrought iron archways marking the major intersections.

“The updates have really helped clean things

up and add a new dimension to the area,” Nemanja says. “We even have a small park going in alongside City Hall. It’s all very refreshing.”

“The Q” prides itself on offering a little something for everyone with its many cafes, eateries and specialty stores. That’s in addition to the many professional services located along the street including pharmacists, engineers and architects, not to mention banking opportunities at nearby financial institutions like TD Canada Trust, CIBC and the Bank of Montreal.

Faced with some turnover in tenancy following the departure of Historic Niagara, the Downtown BIA has gone to great lengths to add new anchor businesses to the street. In recent weeks, they’ve added such operations as Cupolo’s Sporting Goods and Lyndesfarne Theatre Projects—a St. Catharines theatre company which has taken over the refurbished Seneca Queen Theatre. The downtown area also sports many long-standing businesses like The Camera Place, Moody’s Bakery, and Olsen-Sottile Insurance Brokers Inc., and new kids on the block like Coffee Culture, Pulp Comics and Taps Micro Brewery.

Tenancy is one thing. But the Downtown BIA hasn’t forgotten the importance of adding a little excitement to life on Queen Street. In the past few years, the agency has launched a

number of festivals designed to add some local colour and draw Falls residents back to the downtown core. These include the Springlicious Food Festival which recently celebrated its fifth year, and the upcoming Buskerfest Niagara that will take place on Labour Day weekend and feature street performances by more than 20 international buskers.

Nemanja says the Downtown BIA has several other exciting events in the works.

“We have plans to launch a new jazz & blues concert series this summer that will take place right on the steps of City Hall,” he explains. “There’s also the ‘Kick Start On Queen’ on July 19th. It’s a free pre-party for the Niagara Motorcycle Show going on later this month with lots of motorcycle accessory vendors, live music and the Miss Niagara Motorcycle Show Semi-Finals.”

These are just a few of the projects the Downtown BIA has planned for Queen Street in the coming months. But Nemanja says it won’t end there.

“We’ve had discussions with a number of business owners over the last while,” he says, “and we’re hoping to make some big announcements soon. We always look forward to working with new entrepreneurs and helping them be a part of The Q experience.” **HL**