

Luke Weiler

March 26, 2021

Mayor Cam Guthrie;
Members of Council
City of Guelph
1 Carden Street
Guelph, ON N1H 3A1

RE: Seasonal Patio Program (SPP)

Dear Mayor Guthrie and members of council:

I am writing to ask that you adopt some version of options 2 or option 3 as presented in the staff report on the 2021 - 2023 Seasonal Patio Program.

As you know, staff endorsed option 1, providing for road closures during “special events only”. Options 2 and 3 would close roads either on weekends, or throughout the summer. Committee of the Whole endorsed option 1 and I’m encouraging council to reconsider that decision.

Staff state the question of the road closures led to polarization, with majorities in favour of regular closures, but opposition from businesses that did not have outdoor patios:

“In contrast, the majority of businesses without seasonal patios who responded to engagement activities reported feeling that the 2020 TPP negatively impacted their revenue or had no impact at all.” (Staff Report, p. 5)

With respect to those business owners, I take the theorized connection between self-reported claims of business loss *during an unprecedented global pandemic* and the patio program with a grain of salt. I find it equally plausible that the complaints reflect opinions about neighbouring businesses or dislike of the program for unrelated reasons.

Opposition was also stated by the customers of these businesses:

“Customer complaints included not being able to get to these other businesses in a timely manner due to a road closure or confusion in access to alternative parking options. Others criticized the program for helping only a few businesses and raised public health concerns related to COVID-19.” (Staff Report, p. 6)

I will say Guelph has a parking problem. Not a problem of too little parking, however. Guelph has a problem of people who believe they should be able to park in front of any business they want to go to. If they do not find it, they say, “there is no parking

downtown". I do not know where this comes from (a time when the city was smaller? earlier recessions when the downtown was half vacant storefronts?) I think most business owners downtown will confirm that clients and customers often begin meetings and shopping by talking about "how hard it was to find parking" - the issue being this pernicious misbelief - not an actual absence of parking.

I have lived downtown or close-by for more than ten years. I work downtown. I go there all the time, both on foot and by car. I never had *less* trouble finding parking downtown than in the summer of 2020. The new parkade was almost empty every time I went past it (although I often saw cars parked illegally nearby on Wilson St.). I don't take seriously claims of having trouble finding parking last summer.

Likewise, people can be sensitive to mild inconveniences. When I read people had trouble getting around in a "timely manner", what I hear is that someone forgot about (or didn't know of) the downtown road closure, came upon it while driving, and then had to go around it. Total time lost, probably two or three minutes. Hopefully a lesson learned and an inconvenience not to be repeated. But in my experience, people can harbour the memories of these trivial inconveniences and talk about them a lot. I am sure that business owners got an earful, and those minor complaints have now been transformed into an issue you are being asked to treat seriously.

I do not know what to say about the criticisms that the program helped only a few businesses. This is certainly true, but to what point? It is equally true that only some businesses took advantage of the program. Many could have done so but chose not to for reasons known only to them. Other businesses which surely would take advantage of the program did not exist or were not started because of the program's unreliable nature and murky future. If the city offered some predictability, I would expect many more businesses to open that would take full advantage of road closures.

I am asking you to show some leadership and move beyond the parochial concerns that militate for option 1. This is an opportunity to engage in serious place-making in a way that has not happened in this city before.

Guelph's downtown is beautiful. It has a charm found rarely elsewhere in Ontario. It has a walkable layout amid attractive and unique stone buildings. It was designed for people on foot, without motor traffic. You have the opportunity to create a place that is pedestrian-oriented, safe, and pleasant to spend time in. I am not asking that you exclude motor vehicles from the entire downtown. I am asking you to create at least one fully pedestrianized street, for at least part of the time - with some predictable regularity.

This is not a weird idea. Many cities have such streets, locally celebrated and a delight for visitors. In Canada, the lovely rue Prince Arthur in Montreal leaps to mind. Abroad, one finds streets such as rue Buci in Paris, Kalverstraat in Amsterdam, and Strøget in Copenhagen.

I think this is actually a minor request. The internet says that there are some 581 kilometres of roads in Guelph. If the city cannot exclude traffic from a few hundred metres of road downtown in the place most suited to it, I feel this represents a serious failure of municipal organization.

I respect staff's approach, but the half-loaf compromise proposed is actually the worst of both worlds. Offering periodic "special event" road closures makes this feature unpredictable and unreliable for citizens and visitors. Who knows if the roads will be open or closed on any given day? If people had trouble with a continuous and regular road closure, unpredictable one-off events should cause even more frustration.


The idea of keeping two traffic lanes open through the SPP is a mistake. It is an attempt to please both sides by having it both ways. It does not appreciate that these are two incompatible uses. I offer you a personal experience to illustrate:

I had a pint on a patio on a lovely day on Wyndham Street last week. While I sat with my partner in the sun, vehicles quite literally roared past. Multiple cars, illegally modified to produce booming and crackling engine noise, ripped up and down Wyndham Street. We heard them coming blocks away. Large, powerful pick-up trucks drove at speed within inches of our table. Engines gunned. Very loud (and honestly, foul-smelling) municipal buses passed by, drowning out our conversation. Multiple cars sat idled on the street, drivers checking their phones, one walking away to go get take-out.

This was a patio that I went to repeatedly in the summer. I took out-of-town visitors there. Everyone loved it. The two experiences were night and day. With the road open, it was not nice. It was not pleasant. It was not relaxing. It was actually infuriating. Sadly, it made me not want to go back.

This city deserves one or two comfortable streets where people can sit and enjoy the day, walk and cross the road without fear of getting hit by a car, and speak without having to raise their voices. You now have a great opportunity to create such streets on Wyndham and Macdonell now. I'd ask that you take that opportunity and have the courage to say that a street without cars can not only be complete, it can be something even better.

Thank you for your time. Take care.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Luke Weiler', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Luke Weiler