

February 9, 2024

To Mayor Cam Guthrie and members of Guelph City Council:

I am writing regarding the February 14th Special City Council Meeting Agenda item 2.1 *Public Space Use Bylaw*.

For over a year, I have worked alongside city staff, social and health service providers, the Guelph Police Service, the Downtown Guelph Business Association and other community stakeholders to try and establish a 'whole of community' approach to addressing the needs of people struggling with substance abuse, mental health, and homelessness.

As co-chair of the [Strategic Advisory on Downtown Guelph](#), and then again through collective efforts of our [community-led housing coalition](#), we identified early the need to solve for some of the most acute challenges facing our downtown core.

To that end, I am glad to finally see a discussion regarding safe public spaces for all come forward. I am certain that City of Guelph staff alongside their counterparts at the County of Wellington, and in coordination with those with lived experiences and with other relevant agencies and stakeholders, can determine how best to meet the needs of community members in both the immediate, short and long term.

We continue to acknowledge the immensely difficult experiences of businesses, their employees, as well as individuals and families that spend time downtown. Just a few months ago we received a letter from one of our members who described a terrible occurrence experienced by one of his staff while leaving work. This letter has been disseminated to the Chamber and DGBA network. I have attached a copy of the letter for your reference.

As always, do not hesitate to leverage the Chamber and the assets our network has access to, so we can respond with the urgency and bias for action this crisis requires of us all.

Sincerely,



Shakiba Shayani
President & CEO
Guelph Chamber of Commerce



By and large, downtown Guelph is still a great place to work, live, and visit—and hundreds of people do so every day.

We have all seen the visible increase in the number of people downtown who are struggling with homelessness, mental health struggles, addiction, and other challenges.

We can say that we want our downtown to be safe and accessible. However, it is our actions in a time of need that truly demonstrate our willingness to follow through with that ideology.

Last week, one of my company's employees was leaving our downtown office when she was followed and subsequently assaulted and chased by a man exhibiting very threatening behaviour.

What seemed to be a lucky break happened when a staff member leaving work at a nearby store saw the assault and thankfully intervened, buying her some time and space. Terrified, she ran to the front door of the store, seeking safety inside. Unfortunately, the store owner, who was closing up for the evening, was inside watching the situation unfold, closed the door on her and held it shut, while his staff member helped distract the assailant.

Now, there are many people to be commended in this situation: the store employee who intervened, putting himself in harm's way to help protect a visibly shaken victim. The Guelph Police, who ultimately apprehended the assailant in short order, the people in their vehicles drawing attention to the situation by honking their horns and yelling from their cars. As well as Victim Services Wellington, who has checked in on our staff member many times to see how she is managing after her scary ordeal.

However, I am extremely disheartened that a downtown Guelph business owner would neglect to offer their store as shelter for a woman being assaulted in front of their very eyes.

Our downtown is changing. We need more people who will step up and help one another in a time of need. This not only refers to situations like the one our employee faced. It also means offering support toward services that help our downtown people who are facing struggle and despair.

As a long-time owner, operator, and employer in the downtown core, I feel we have a responsibility to do our part to keep each other safe, to protect our staff, our customers and one another. We need to all be prepared and alert, as well as vigilant in our actions.

My hope in sharing this incident is to see the people of downtown Guelph—the people that work, live, shop or do business in the downtown core to consider their actions. That we look out for one another and do the right thing when and if we are called upon. The world needs more compassion, and more everyday heroes – people ready to help one another as good neighbours and simply because it is the right thing to do.

Jason Ashdown
Co-Founder
Skyline Group