

News

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A short cut to a Business Improvement Area gives Rogers Road a chance to shine

Mike Adler | York Guardian



Rogers Road BIA in works | Dan Pearce/Metroland

Rogers Road has what it takes to turn its old commercial areas around, but so do other places in Toronto where efforts to get organized go nowhere.

Its 82 Business Improvement Areas split improvement costs with the city, and market places you've heard about, like Corso Italia, Bloor West Village, The Danforth and The Beach.

This means Rogers Road, and other spots where merchants lack the ambition and the money to start a BIA fall further behind those who do.

So Rogers is an experiment, and a model if it succeeds, for commercial streets which can't quite make it on their own.

"I see some potential here," Davenport Councillor Cesar Palacio said last week at the front of the Nova Era Bakery, where Rogers meets Old Weston Road.

Part of the former City of York where streets connect at odd angles, the area is a low-rise collection of barbershops, bakeries, sports bars, small grocery stores and restaurants like the O'Sole Mio, which offers dinner and dancing.

There are vacant storefronts, but in the past few years professional families from The Annex, seeking an affordable neighbourhood, have moved in, said Palacio, "so we have new blood, and new vision."

Elsewhere in the city, a BIA forms and then does studies, which are expensive. This time, Toronto Council chose to do studies first.

Next month, Palacio will share with the local businesses what an "economic scan" of the area shows: from the windows of the Nova Era, the neighbourhood might not look like much, but 19,423 people live or work within two kilometres.

In his fourth term, Palacio, who would share the potential BIA with York South-Weston Councillor Frank Di Giorgio, lives nearby and remembers other efforts to start a BIA on Rogers.

"The support from the city wasn't there," he said, but maintained the studies, showing strengths and weaknesses for the area, can convince enough merchants to join a steering committee that will be a first step to a BIA.

"This is the information that's been missing all along - not only how we can help, but how to create a healthy, prosperous commercial street everyone benefits from," Palacio said.

If it works, he predicted, Rogers will be a destination street whose residents won't "have to go to College, Bloor or even to St. Clair to do their shopping."

Palacio said he kept the Toronto Parking Authority from closing its lot east of Rosethorn Avenue by telling them the area will improve; the TPA bought the building next door to add more parking.

Some areas of Toronto benefit more than others from its BIAs. Scarborough, for example, has only four.

East of The Beach, Kingston Road has several small commercial areas but is still suffering the effects from decades of neglect and decay.

There was a BIA in Cliffside years ago, but it fell apart, and getting local business owners together is a challenge, said Scarborough Southwest Councillor Gary Crawford, adding he'd love to encourage a BIA anywhere on Kingston Road.

Condominium-based redevelopment is creeping east and starting to change that apathy on Kingston, said Crawford, adding Birch Cliff, Kingston's easternmost commercial section in Scarborough, is transforming "pretty much by the month."

But the road is still home to a number of run-down motels and used car lots many locals would like to see disappear. This summer, one business owner surveyed other Kingston Road merchants on "the current state of Kingston Road," asking them to "check the obstacles" they feel stand in the way of a BIA.

The councillor last month said he's trying to assist the drive towards a BIA, but the merchant's effort so far has a decidedly angry tone, referring to Crawford's own assurances on redevelopment as the "Count on Condos Campaign."

It takes time and money to revitalize a commercial strip, said Mike Major, Toronto's manager of BIAs, but if the Rogers Road project works, it would likely be tried on Kingston Road.

Palacio, meanwhile, will host his public meeting at St. Nicholas of Bari School, 363 Rogers Rd. from 6 to 8 p.m., on Monday, Oct. 17.

After listening to the pitch, Alex Dias, the Nova Era's owner, said some local merchants are skeptical on the value of beautification projects - such as new sidewalks or flower pots - a BIA would bring, but he'll be at the meeting.

"What do we have to lose?" Palacio asked him.

EDITOR'S NOTE: The meeting date and location to discuss a future BIA on Rogers Road has been changed by the councillor. This story has been updated from its original version to reflect the new information.