

Peterborough Currents Election Special: Downtown Vitality

"The whole drug scene in the downtown core is disturbing... literally the walking dead up and down the main drags." – Resident.

"I feel there's this preconceived idea that downtown is unsafe or is not the same as it was.... The reason it isn't, is because you're not here. So come downtown and check it out." -Another Resident.



Between art crawls and sidewalk sales, new businesses opening and too-often quickly shuttering, and the visible presence of poverty, homelessness, and addiction on the streets, Peterborough's downtown is in constant churn. It's the heart of local business and culture, and it's also the hub for local social services. With some people living their whole lives downtown and others afraid to come anywhere near, how do we support small business, grow our artistic community, and make the downtown feel welcoming for everyone?

How do we make downtown Peterborough feel safer?

Downtown has Peterborough's highest crime rate – but it's also the most people-dense and business-dense, and most offenses are non-violent property crime. The Community FIRST program puts major police resources into low-value crimes, like shopping cart thefts, to deter would-be offenders. In 2024, the Unity Project pilot saw downtown businesses partnering with One City for a private hotline to call in case of people in mental health crisis, without the need for police intervention. Through different methods, both try to improve community safety, but also peace of mind for business owners and downtown visitors.

Why are there so many closed storefronts downtown?

With rising inflation and skyrocketing commercial rents, it's tough to hold onto a business downtown. Support for small business owners can come in many forms. Incubators and accelerator programs offered by groups like the Innovation Cluster, as well as grants and forgivable loans, can kickstart new enterprises, and promotion like DBIA's The Boro help bring people downtown. Grants and tax incentives can also encourage landowners to renovate and redevelop empty buildings and lots. However, the lower tax valuations on those lots gives landlords an incentive to keep them empty.



Downtown Vitality: By the numbers

800 police incidents per month in 2024
in the central (downtown) area

3,046 Community FIRST calls in 2025,
leading to \$40k in returned property

31 empty storefronts throughout
Peterborough downtown

\$25 in estimated economic impact
spin-offs for every \$1 invested
in the arts

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How do we support arts and events in the downtown?

Whether through organized events like the First Friday and Artsweek or a random bar show on a Thursday night, Peterborough's artists activate the downtown and encourage visitors from across the city. Multiple local venues have closed in recent years, and with after-effects of the pandemic still lingering and many artists living at or near the poverty line, small municipal investments in arts and culture can have a big impact. The Community Grants program funds events and organizations (in the arts and elsewhere), but with yearly re-applications and constant threats to reduce funding, the program remains precarious.

