

'Loud and clear': voice of Erin businesses to be heard by new liaison committee

Jordan Snobelen



A liaison committee is being formed to help mitigate wastewater plant construction disruptions for Main Street businesses. (Photo by Tristan Clark)

ERIN – Erin Chamber of Commerce board chair and local realtor Ann Shanahan left her delegation with town council on Jan. 19 feeling “very deflated.”

Mayor Michael Dehn told Shanahan she had a clear message with a specific ask, but that specific ask — for a taskforce giving voice to Main Street businesses about mitigating interruptions from wastewater treatment plant construction — was never directly addressed by council.

“Our local businesses have suffered through two years of a local pandemic and then over three months of traffic disruption, congestion, [and] non-existent parking, all culminating in a colossal financial loss,” Shanahan told council.

Enbridge gasline work along Main Street last year added to pandemic challenges for businesses and Shanahan suggested that “could have been avoided with better planning and better communication.”

And now there’s work coming to Main Street related to the wastewater treatment plant that Shanahan says “will have an astronomical impact on our business community.”

A recently launched online survey directed at businesses seeking to understand how disruptions can be mitigated isn’t enough, she said, asking councillors to “hear our questions, ideas and allow our instrumental input to these critical decisions that directly impact the survival of our local businesses.”

Tunnelling work coming to Main Street

According to town infrastructure director Nick Colucci, “linear work” began last week on Wellington Road 52 and will continue down Main Street to Lions’ Club Park.

The work along Main will involve tunneling for shafts at eight locations, requiring those areas to be cordoned off.

But a detailed schedule of when and where that work will occur isn’t yet available.

Shanahan contends communication from the town about the imminent construction, through a presentation to the chamber on Jan. 5, was sudden and caught members by surprise.

Rather than consulting with the very people being affected, she said, the town is instead making decisions on its own and announcing them with little time for feedback.

Local businesses, council was told by Shanahan, “are the heart of this town and they deserve not only to be heard but to be listened to and included on decisions that so greatly affect them.”

“These people eat sleep and breath Main Street,” she said.

In response to questions from the *Advertiser*, town spokesperson Lavina Dixit wrote “every effort has been made by the town to communicate on a regular basis.

“Last year alone ... four public information centres were held that provided the timelines for construction.”

Notices have been distributed to residents and presentations on traffic management options made to the chamber and community groups, Dixit added.

Exact traffic plans will be presented to council on Feb. 9.

Liaison committee being formed

“I came out of the meeting very deflated,” Shanahan told the *Advertiser* on Jan. 27.

"We wanted some form of action and didn't feel like we got it at that meeting."

A week later, Shanahan says she still hadn't heard anything from council and reached out to Mayor Michael Dehn.

"We're not backing down; it's way too important to these business owners," she told the newspaper prior to a meeting with the mayor last week about assembling a taskforce.

Dehn did not respond to an email and voicemail requesting comment for this article. Speaking with Shanahan again on Jan. 30, the *Advertiser* learned the town is forming a liaison committee.

Councillor Cathy Aylard, the council representative to the committee, told the newspaper she was to meet with town staff this week to firm up details such as the committee's role, membership, meeting schedules and agenda.

"We're looking at forming this committee quickly," Aylard said.

"It will help mitigate the impact of construction on our community," she added, without being able to speak to specifics.

"The message from the chamber was loud and clear and we take it very seriously," she said. "We're in action, we're listening."

Shanahan said she is happy with the response and feels good about Aylard's position on the committee.

"She, from day one, was in support of the chamber and the businesses having a say, and I think she's the right person for the job," Shanahan said.

