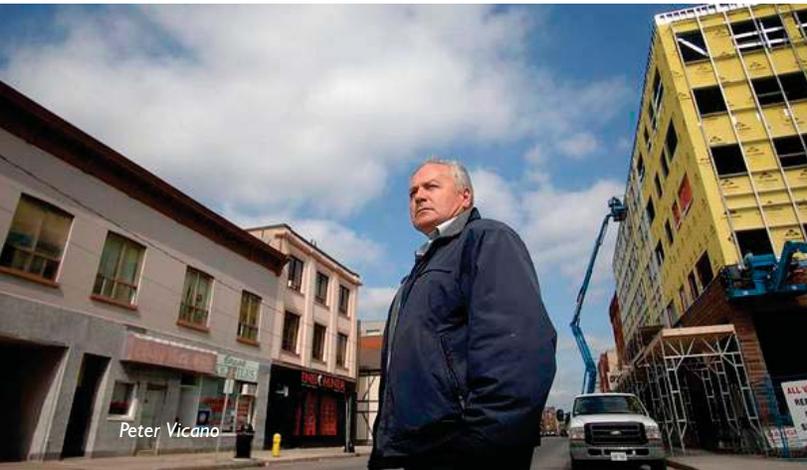


Students bring new vitality to Brantford's core



Peter Vicano

Article Courtesy of The Globe and Mail

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Published Monday, Jun. 04 2012

As an 11-year old growing up in Brantford, Ont., Peter Vicano delivered the local newspaper, the Expositor, which operated from a 1850s-era downtown landmark. Today, the 61-year-old developer is converting the red stone building (the newspaper relocated in 2010) into 65 apartment units of student housing leased to the satellite campus here of Wilfrid Laurier University in nearby Waterloo.

The \$11-million project is one example of how post-secondary institutions are renewing mid-size Ontario cities, anxious to reinvent themselves as 21st century destinations for high value jobs and investment. In Brantford, higher education is an undeniable catalyst but, alone, cannot complete the rejuvenation.

“The second shoe is going to have to fall in Brantford,” says Rick Haldenby, director of the school of architecture at the

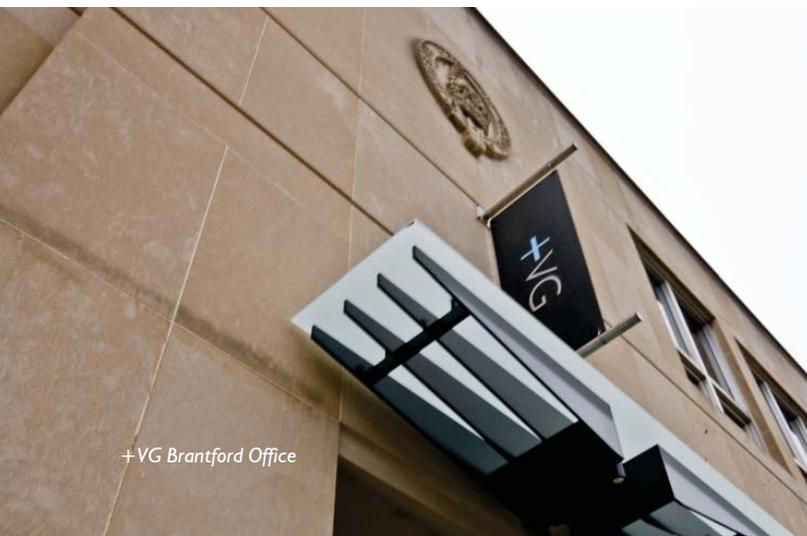
University of Waterloo. “The postsecondary institutions are there and now the question is ‘what private enterprise are you going to be able to add to that mix?’ ” Back in the mid-1990s, teaming up with a university was the key for an industrial city situated high above the Grand River known for its famous sons, Alexander Graham Bell and Wayne Gretzky.

Hammered by the bankruptcies of Massey Ferguson and other farm equipment manufacturers in the previous decade, Brantford suffered a steep decline with a city centre of vacant buildings, strip clubs and crime. “I shared in the vision that if Brantford and the downtown were to get moving, we needed a postsecondary institution here and that the city should do everything in its power to attract them,” recalls Mr. Vicano, an early proponent of a city-Laurier partnership in the mid-1990s. Since then, the city of 93,000 has become a satellite for three universities and two colleges. A \$58.4-million YMCA facility (with Laurier and three

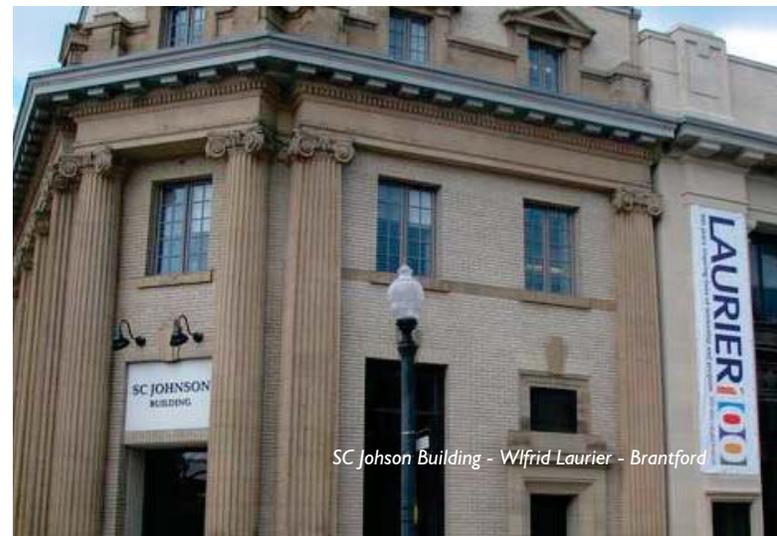
levels of government), is planned for the edge of downtown where the city got a black eye in 2010 for demolishing 41 pre-Confederation buildings. The proposed modern Y – a pencil box on stilts that drops three storeys to a lower street – presents a dramatic contrast to the 19th century commercial buildings dotted through downtown.

Over the past dozen years, institutions have invested \$130-million downtown, including \$21-million from the city. “We had an idea in our heads and a vision of what we wanted to see,” says Brantford Mayor Chris Friel, who, after losing an election, returned in 2010. “Coming back after seven years out, this has outstripped my vision 10-fold.” In 1999, the city invested \$1.4-million to renovate the former Carnegie Library, turning over the elegant domed facility to Laurier for \$1. From 39 students, Laurier Brantford has grown to 2,700 students in buildings that it owns or leases, with more expansion in the works.

Prior to Laurier’s arrival, Mohawk College operated a



+VG Brantford Office



SC Johnson Building - Wilfrid Laurier - Brantford



Carnegie Library - Wilfrid Laurier - Brantford

campus from a south-end industrial area. After failing to move its satellite downtown, Mohawk dispersed students to other campuses in the region, but leased a former movie theatre in Brantford's core "academic district" for some classes.

"Great downtowns are great people places and so why not move your people there," says Mohawk president Robert Rob MacIsaac. Ontario colleges have a mandate to promote economic development, but Mohawk eyed downtown for its attractive learning environment. "It is about student life and having students in places that are interesting," Mr. MacIsaac says.

As students and faculty breathe life into the core – the city also built Harmony Square on a main street as a public space for summer concerts and ice skating – local businesses report a pick-up in activity. In a city-commissioned economic analysis this year, the number of Brantford businesses reporting a positive impact from the education institutions tripled to 47 per cent in 2011, up from 15 per cent in 2005. Office vacancy is about 10 per cent, down from 20 per cent two years ago, aided by a commercial lease in a former failed downtown mall.

Several factors still weigh against a fast infusion of private investment, seen by Mr. Haldenby as vital to robust renewal. For one, postsecondary programs run only eight months of the year. Moreover, the former Massey Ferguson site, on 52 acres of contaminated land about one kilometre from downtown, awaits a clean-up effort with no obvious buyer. Still, newcomers are bullish on Brantford.

In 2009, architect Paul Sapounzi, president of +VG Architects, moved his company headquarters to a former bank building just opposite the Expositor. The postsecondary presence, the new Y and talk of performing arts centre are essential first steps to remaking Brantford, he says. "Commercial

vibrancy in a downtown is the very last thing and it is not something you can create without the fundamental machinery that is being installed right now." As Mr. Vicano readies the for-

mer newspaper building for occupancy this fall, he is cautiously optimistic. "Brantford isn't where it should be and has to go," he says. "We still have not reached the critical mass of an economy, but we are going to get there."

Schools in city Five postsecondary institutions offer programs mostly in Brantford's "academic district." They are:

Brantford Laurier:

a campus of 15,000 students is projected by 2023.

Conestoga College:

new business programs this fall, 2012, in co-operation with Wilfrid Laurier University.

Mohawk College: about 1,000 students expected in downtown Brantford classes by 2013.

McMaster University: faculty of health sciences operates a clinical education centre at Brantford General Hospital, with an expanded family medicine residency program by 2013.

Six Nations Polytechnic: some programs offered jointly with Wilfrid Laurier University and McMaster University.

Nipissing University: Bachelor of Arts / Bachelor of Education Contemporary studies in conjunction with Wilfrid Laurier.

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