



Athens was once a very busy centre of commerce.

SMALL TOWN BUSINESS CHALLENGES

By Sally Smid

During the Golden Age of Athens, in the early 1900s, most residents worked and shopped in the village. It was a busy place for commerce and trade as residents did business with everything from grocers and milliners to blacksmiths and cobblers. Perhaps most importantly, it was a place where much social interaction and networking took place around the stove in the general store or on the board sidewalks.

Over time, commuting became a common practice as it has for many small-town Ontarians. Added to the challenge is decreasing jobs in neighbouring cities, changing small town local economies in many ways. While urban areas struggle with how to address population growth, smaller centres have alternate problems. Service clubs, once responsible for major community projects are faltering as memberships decline.

However there have been those that still choose a small town environment where life seems to move slower, people know each other better and look out for the welfare of their neighbours. Small towns are often considered more friendly, safer, and “a great place to raise a family”. Many will agree that all towns have individual strengths to draw upon. Perhaps it means recognizing those strengths and addressing weaknesses is the way to build up a community. Many challenges are involved, but with a vision, a proper economic development plan, infrastructure funding and municipal guidance, such progressive change can occur.

Athens Hardware on Main St. in Athens (owned by Reg Smith) has found success in striving to know what customers are looking for and making items available that are in demand in the village, to the area farms, and to the cottagers. Not everyone realizes what the store does have to offer or that price comparing is possible. Doors and windows, cabinets, lumber and other building materials are available, as well as installations and rentals at lower or comparable prices.

Giles and Jan Loshaw of Stedman’s are preparing to retire after 38 years. They have had personal connections with their customers and have provided many items that have not been available in other stores. They have been a very valuable part of the community. Much has changed over the years and on-line shopping now presents new challenges to retail stores such as this. Though many folks still want to “see and feel” items before they make a purchase. Unlike on-line purchasing, local small town merchants are prepared to advise and assist patrons with friendly and customized service.



Reids Flowers has had quite a few changes under new owners Scott and Pat Jones.

Fires have certainly changed the face of Athens over the years. Athens Barber Blair Chant, who has been in business for over 40 years, experienced a fire which destroyed the building that housed his iconic barber shop. He is now continuing his trade at his residence on the corner of Wellington and Elgin St., though his preference is by appointment.

One of the newest businesses in Athens is 247 Fitness, operated by BJ Ward. This 24-hour fitness centre has been very busy and successful. The centre is open 24 hours a day and has all of the latest fitness equipment. Membership is limited to avoid waits.

Other businesses have changed owners as well, such as Reid's Flower Shop.

For many of the special occasions in life, the most memorable moments may be when the local florist delivery man appears at your door. Such has been the task of Reid's Flowers at 2 Main St. West in Athens for many years. The Reid's retired several years ago and the new owners/operators, Scott and Pat Jones, continue to serve the area in the same friendly, personal, small-town tradition. It is housed in the oldest stone building in Athens. The Jones' have added new dimensions to the business, which now includes a thriving gift shop with an affordable array of all occasion gifts. Pat has also opened a full service beauty salon at the same location.

With a growing senior population, a local drug store is very important. The Athens Pharmasave is located in the same building as Lamb's Drugstore was over 100 years ago. This business makes a point of serving customers in a modern and personal way and is always ready to give back to the community.

The local Farmer's Market has also grown in popularity. There are now quite a few vendors at the Market each summer to make it an even better possibility to find local produce. Area cottagers also depend on the village businesses for many different needs. Many new residents to the community comment that Athens is a place where you can find everything you need on Main St.,



Left: Old Lamb's Drugstore and present day Athens Pharmasave same building.

be it groceries, a pharmacy, postal service, banking, auto service, eateries, a coffee shop, real estate, or antique and second hand items, without the city traffic. Athens also has schools, churches, a library, a museum, health center, CPHC and a variety of services which make travelling to bigger centers unnecessary. In this day in age, it is also possible to conduct business on-line from your home in Athens, as various authors and business professionals have discovered. Some families have also found that it is a central location, and one

partner can commute to work in Kingston, while the other commutes to Ottawa.

It can be frustrating for Business Owners to hear local customers say, "I have looked everywhere to find this, but never thought of looking in Athens first." Perhaps it is more important than ever for small town residents who enjoy the many benefits of living in such locations to be more ready to shop local and support the hometown shops and services in the area so they may continue to exist. **LH**

EDITOR'S NOTE: Athens, compared to larger communities and other small towns, actually has a One Stop Shopping district. However, it is convincing the local residents to "Shop Local" so they can keep their unique community thriving, that is the key. It is the local Merchants and Business Owners that donate goods and services to local Charities/Schools or Groups for Fundraisers. It is important to remember this when shopping for certain products or services. Rather than

"Purchasing Elsewhere" why not keep your shopping local? All you have to do is look in other towns and cities in the area, with their downtowns and see the empty storefronts to give you an idea of how the face of retail and business is changing rapidly in our local area. "Living Here" has always encouraged our readers to "Shop Local". We hope when visiting any of our towns or local communities, you will shop and spend here to help our local economy.