Fostering "sense of place" in downtown Barrie: From busking ban to cultural enrichment

By wirestaff

Barrie city council is considering returning buskers to the downtown core, just a few years after they were forced out as "potential nuisances." A change of heart at city hall may mean street performers will soon be back in the city core, possibly under controlled conditions.

"It's a small, but telling shift in thinking," said a city council member. "This is part of Barrie's strategy for using arts and culture to spur economic growth."

Busking stigma, however, is aAnything that might create a "sense of place" could be of great benefit to the city, noted the council member.

"If it is done properly, it could bring charm and creativity to the downtown," he said.

"People who visit Barrie should want to return — perhaps permanently," he continued. "We want our visitors to have a lasting impression of Barrie."

Barrie's downtown area was once known for its lively street performers, who were a common sight in the area before city council passed a Nuisance Bylaw in 2004. Buskers were subsequently banned, under threat of loitering charges.

The move lumped street entertainers together with aggressive panhandlers and loiterers, who were suggested to intimidate and annoy pedestrians. It is arguable whether the bylaw has resulted in any real change, but what is not disputed is that any potential for developing a charming "busker" street scene evaporated.

Now, the city's cultural department is pondering the return of street performers to the downtown core. Rather than chasing talent away from public spaces, it seeks to "provide a stage" for it.

"It's a small but telling shift in thinking, and fits in with the city’s strategy of using arts and culture to spark economic growth. Buskers may only be a small part of that puzzle, but it’s a sign the city is serious about heeding the advice of experts such as Richard Florida," said the council member.

Consider communities with vibrant street scenes. They leave lasting impressions. When people visit Barrie, they should want to return — perhaps permanently.

Of course, that doesn’t mean anyone with a guitar should be able to set up shop on any street corner. The city is on the right track by suggesting that busking be “controlled,” which will likely lead to auditions and perhaps licensing. A variety of talents should also be considered, from juggling to magic.

The strategy of creating a lively busking scene is a good one that has the potential to pay dividends down the road, and not only on the streets of downtown Barrie.