

ENTERTAINMENT DISTRICT: 'YOU NEED A VISION'

A master plan to rein in 'Clubland'

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Business owners in Toronto's Entertainment District are poised to release a new master plan, and although they won't come right out and say it, the blueprint appears designed to put the squeeze on Richmond Street's booze-soaked club zone.

The strategy: Improve landscaping, protect heritage sites and, above all, encourage more residents, shops and restaurants to move in so there'll be a critical mass of people with a vested interest in cracking down on "Clubland."

"The reality is, the clubs cause more problems than they're worth," says Councillor Adam Vaughan, whose ward, Trinity-Spadina, includes the Entertainment District.

"I'm bringing in development to get rid of clubs. Boo-hoo."

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Although Mr. Vaughan has been fighting nightclubs for two years, the difference now is that business owners in the Entertainment District - which, as a neighbourhood, stretches well beyond Richmond's nightclubs, as far south as Lake Shore Boulevard - founded a formal Business Improvement Area (BIA) last November.

Since then they've spent more than \$50,000 hiring an urban design firm to draft the master plan, which will be presented to the BIA's board next month. Some club owners fear it's all subtly engineered to force them out of business.

"Clubs are too often unfairly demonized," says Peter Gatien, owner of CiRCA, a 55,000-square-foot nightclub on John Street south of Richmond. "If they make it impossible for legitimate operators to function, it will end up going the way it was 10 or 15 years ago, where you had raves in warehouses and unsafe areas."

The Entertainment District boasts about 2,000 businesses. (Not all are members of the BIA.) The BIA began working on the master plan in the spring. "You need a vision," says Jack Robinson, chair of the BIA's board.

"The master plan can assist in guiding us with decisions, priorities, impacts on the physical environment of the district in a strategic way so that we can go forward with the city to make things happen."

While the master plan has long-term goals that may not be realized for a decade, the first phase is expected to roll out as early as next year, a phase that will include "beautification" projects.

"The reality is that the club district is changing," says Harold Madi of The Planning Partnership, which the BIA hired to write the master plan. "The real exciting stuff in this master plan is, what does that Richmond-Adelaide corridor become, what's it going to evolve into?"

An online survey conducted earlier this year by the BIA as part of the master-plan process identified "noise, crime and safety" as an "issue."

But pushing clubs out is not a goal of the plan, says Mr. Robinson.

"I think it's important to have clubs. You've got to have some reasonable, good entertainment. It's just got to be the right people and safe," he says.

Indeed, the BIA has formed a "safe streets" committee tasked with the job of "constantly working with police" and ensuring that "forms are filled out when somebody sees something that is not right," says Mr.

Robinson.

The owner of the club Crocodile Rock sits on the BIA board, says Mr. Robinson, and other clubs have been invited to participate in creating the master plan.

But some clubs are just now discovering that a plan exists.

"This is the first I've heard of the master plan," says Arthur Geringas, general manager of Republik nightclub.

With the plan calling for more residential units and retail businesses in the area, it will inevitably increase pressure on clubs to close, he says. "There's a general sense against nightclubs to begin with downtown, so anything at this point doesn't really surprise me."

For his part, Mr. Vaughan believes the club fad is beginning to disappear on its own - the BIA master plan and his crackdowns are only hastening the inevitable.

The club industry "is a generational phenomena that's had its moment and is disappearing all over North America," he says.

"We're just making sure it disappears in a responsible way and what gets replaced with it is not empty warehouses but, in fact, the new neighbourhood. And if [clubs] don't like it, well, they can move."

While the club district is changing, it is still too dangerous, he says. "From 3 o'clock in the morning to 5 o'clock in the morning it's a friggin' war zone. It's less so now. We've been cracking down for two straight years and coming after the club owners with everything we can get our hands on."

However, Mr. Vaughan says he is not intent on forcing all clubs out of the neighbourhood. "If we build the neighbourhood properly, then the good nightclubs will survive and be viable and contributing partners to the business community," Mr. Vaughan says.

Mr. Gaten says he will be happy to see more cafés and retail stores brought to the Entertainment District. However, he says nightclubs contribute to the culture of Toronto, and their contribution should not be ignored by the BIA or the city.

"I believe that most of the operators in this area are very focused and they're very legitimate," says Mr. Gaten. "If they treat us fairly, we can survive."

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