

## **2017 IDA Award Submission from Downtown London, Ontario, Canada.**

### **Category: Economic Development. Fanshawe College Downtown Campus – Phase 2.**

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London, Ontario – located halfway between Detroit, Michigan and Toronto, Ontario, Canada. A mid sized city, the 11<sup>th</sup> largest in our fine country. Well known – or perhaps locally infamous - for our indecision, conservatism and ability to lose out on opportunities because they are either “too good for London” or “too expensive for the taxpayer.”

In 1998 this all changed, well some of it, when the City of London approved the IDA Pinnacle Award winning Downtown Millennium Plan. (Award received ironically in the same year as this tall tale actually transpired. 2014.)

The decision to invest heavily in London’s downtown continued off and on for almost 20 years. In 2006/7 under the leadership of a very progressive City Manager, an Economic Development Reserve fund in the amount of \$55 million was created.

\$20 million of this fund was earmarked to bring a post secondary educational institution into the city’s core. (It was and is well know that every great city has a great downtown and every great downtown has a university or college.)

In 2007 negotiations began with Western University and Fanshawe College to offer them a significant amount of financial incentive to purchase and retrofit heritage buildings in the core and bring suitable programs into our revitalizing downtown. It took a few years but Fanshawe College was the most accommodating and shared the City’s vision of a downtown campus. They agreed to bring 1,000 students into the downtown and phase one resulted in a retrofitted building on our “Main Street” which houses the Centre for Digital and Performing Arts. The CPDA opened in 2013 and was immediately successful and attracted more than the forecasted 400 students. A significant win for our members and the college.

Fanshawe’s board of governors were so happy with the outcome that the search for a second building to fulfill their promise of 1,000 students – and the lure of the balance of the \$20 million – soon begun.

An extensive and confidential search was underway for building number two. The criterion for the second building was that it had to be as close as possible to the first campus.

As fate would have it – our oldest family run department store – Kingsmills - the oldest independent department store in Canada – announced that they would be retiring and that the building was up for sale. The community was in mourning – the beloved Kingsmills – where generations of families shopped all year but would line up outside on the street each and every Christmas for the 15% off sale to kick off the season. No more lining up – no more sale – no more beautiful Christmas windows. Sadness was felt throughout the downtown.

They were dealing with many offers and one was being taken seriously. Then the deal fell through.

We all waited to see what fate had in store for this iconic building. Leaving it vacant was not a desirable option for the owners or the community.

The loss of this business was devastating to the community and we held our collective breaths to see what would transpire.

All was quiet for a few months while the store liquidated and vacated. Then in June of 2014 Fanshawe held a media conference to announce that they had purchased the Kingsmill’s Building and would be bringing 1600 students to the campus for the Culinary Arts, Hospitality and Tourism School

along with a new IT program. Double the students originally promised – an iconic heritage building promising to be lovingly retrofitted – but not maintained in its original state. Building code gets in the way of a college operating in 1800's conditions. What could go wrong???

Well, Fanshawe requested that the City up the ante to \$30 million from the original \$20 million. A reasonable request since they were doubling the number of students and bringing a program that was very well suited to the heart of the City.

Council of the day objected to the media conference preceding the request for funding, it was an election year and the owner of the building they had originally made a conditional offer on was crying foul. A perfect trifecta and very predictable for London where nothing really good goes unchallenged or heavily criticized.

Starting to sound like a bad movie?? We thought so.

Fast forward to the council's corporate services committee, five members of council charged with making financial recommendations to the entire council. The request for an additional \$10 million was on the agenda and after a painfully long discussion – the request passed 3-2. Not an overwhelming victory but enough to have it placed on the council agenda for the July meeting. The gallery was packed with Fanshawe management, downtown business owners and a large number of citizens with their fingers crossed that the City would approve this request and save this building from an unknown fate and bring lots of students to the core.

Yet another long discussion, with a council clearly divided, the vote deadlocked at 7-7. Under our municipal rules – a tie means a “no.” Disbelief filled the room.

Our organization, Downtown London, was incensed by the decision and rallied the troops, that is board members and community leaders, to see how we could right this ship. The community was outraged and divided, some on the side of “how dare they ask for another \$10m” and others “how could they be so dumb as to turn this down.” A major letter and e-mail campaign ensued like nothing we had ever seen before. **(Innovative.)(Representative.)**

We called a public board meeting and decided that the only way to make council listen was to let money talk. We asked the City clerk what it would take to have the request revisited at council – since no means no – she informed us that the request could be reconsidered in a different amount. We approved a donation of \$1million dollars to Fanshawe's second downtown campus (All the while wondering how the heck we were going to find the \$\$\$ but we have done crazy stuff before – we could do it again!) So the item was back on the agenda and an advocacy push like no other ensued. **(Replicable.)**

Back to committee, 3-2 vote. Déjà vu. Back to council on September 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2014 – a memorable date since a number of our staff were in Ottawa for the IDA conference.

With the gallery filled to overflow – the debate began. Same comments until the last councillor had the floor, and she was the one who had asked the most questions and was bombarded with e-mail from her constituents asking how she could vote against something so good and expect to be reelected – appeared to be changing her mind. It was all we needed. The vote was called..... collective breaths were held. Final tally 8-6 in favour. The crowd went crazy. It was like a sports victory!!

We bid the iconic building a fond farewell over the last Christmas while design was being finalized. We engaged some Fanshawe students and local merchants to decorate the windows for the last time and dressed the construction site with plants.

Fast forward to today, the campus is almost complete and will be occupied in September of 2018.

**(Sustainable.)**

