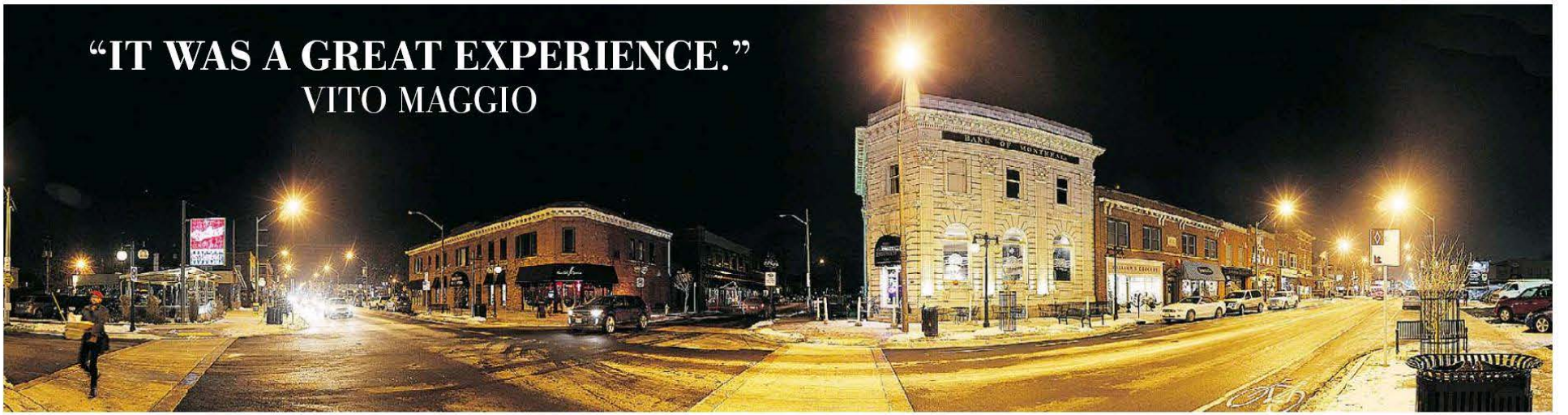


“IT WAS A GREAT EXPERIENCE.”
VITO MAGGIO



TYLER BROWNBRIDGE/The Windsor Star

A panoramic view of Wyandotte Street East shows part of the refurbished Olde Walkerville area, which held a grand re-opening Friday.

Olde Walkerville celebrates completion of \$3M makeover

Big gain, little pain

DOUG SCHMIDT
The Windsor Star

In the middle of tourism and visitor season, when businesses sigh with relief as cash registers begin to sing, the barricades went up along Olde Walkerville's main commercial artery, and the backhoes and bulldozers moved in.

"I was really, really concerned at the beginning — I'd heard so many nightmares about other areas," said Vito Maggio, owner of popular Vito's Pizzeria on Wyandotte Street East.

It seems rare that a major roads project gets done in Windsor without the accompanying horror stories of businesses being forced under by the disruption in commerce from construction that rips up roads and forces street closures. On July 7, the asphalt started getting torn off a six-block stretch of Wyandotte Street East.

What happened over the next four months, however, "makes me believe that people really love the Olde Walkerville area," said Maggio. "It was a great experience."

To celebrate the transformation, Walkerville began throwing a weekend party on Friday night that was just over \$3 mil-

lion in the making.

"It's really beautiful — it was worth going through," said Joan Charette, co-ordinator of the Walkerville Business Improvement Association. Not only did not a single business go under, some did quite well, and the results are something for which the neighbourhood and its commercial core will likely reap long-term benefits.

"There's no good time for it, but we were determined to make the best of the situation," said Charette.

The city — as well as the contractor, J & J Lepera Infrastructures — worked closely with the BIA and the local residents association to minimize the negative impacts of such a large and disruptive construction project.

Maggio said it meant, for example, that he was advised in advance when his section of sidewalk needed to be closed and he was able to convince the contractor to schedule days when his business traffic was lower.

"Lepera was amazing, and the city was great with us ... it was a very friendly working environment," said Charette.

A campaign was started, DIG Walkerville, which used social media and other communication to update area residents



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Newly elected city councillor Chris Holt, left, cuts the ribbon Friday during the official re-opening of Olde Walkerville.

and businesses and encourage Windsorites to continue enjoying the neighbourhood's popular eateries and shops through the construction period.

With underground sewer, water and other infrastructure a 100 years old or more, there was a common recognition the work had to be done.

One of the triggers to do it differently, however, came in the spring of 2013 with an invitation to, and walking audit by, Florida's Dan Burden, a world-renowned advocate of "walkable communities." City planner Thom Hunt said one of the challenges was to address the fast-flowing traffic through the neighbourhood and its affect on pedestrian movement.

The result?

"This is probably our poster child now on how a streetscaping project should proceed," said Hunt, noting the collaborative effort between city departments, including engineering and planning, the BIA and residents. "There's a real harmony now between motorists, pedestrians and cyclists."

Street "bulb-outs" — extending sidewalks into the normal curbside parking lane — prevent motorists from sometimes creating an additional traffic lane or using it to speed through right-hand turns. There are dedicated bike lanes and bike parking stations next to urban-hardy trees surrounded by permeable pavers for ad-

ditional irrigation and protected by decorative iron gating, which also serves as the motif for benches and planters to be filled with grasses and flowers.

"It's great esthetics ... the beautiful stamped concrete makes the area stand out and it's a lot more pedestrian friendly," said Charette.

A bonus benefit so far, said Maggio, is that commercial tractor-trailer trucks appear to be avoiding the new stretch of Wyandotte Street. He suggests it could be the new sidewalk bulb-outs and bike lanes.

Hunt said the new streetscaping also appears to have the intended effect of "calming" traffic along Old Walkerville's piece of Wyandotte Street, making life better for other users, including pedestrians and cyclists.

"It's really nice, we like how it looks and how it turned out," said Bill Hucker of William's Grocery. On days when the sidewalk had to be closed, customers were simply redirected to the back door.

Friday's grand re-opening morphed into Walkerville's 12th annual Holiday Walk weekend with many free offerings, including carollers and horse and carriage rides.

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