

OBIAA 2023 AWARDS SUBMISSION

Contact Name: Kathy Navackas	Pillar & Category: Economic Development (Business Retention, Recruitment, Expansion)
BIA/Organization: Downtown London (MainStreet London)	Time period: November/December 2022
Entry title: Roller Skating @ City Plaza	
Project description: What can you do with a beautiful property to energize the space and entice a diverse audience to come to downtown? Roller skating nights! Physical activity, music, spin off benefits for other businesses. Wins all around.	

NEED OR OPPORTUNITY

MainStreet London is the recruitment and attraction arm of the Downtown London BIA. Our goal is to seek out opportunities and businesses that would be ideal to add to the mix of current dining, retail, and entertainment in downtown London.

Like all downtowns, COVID had a devastating impact on foot traffic and businesses in our core area. Pre-pandemic office workers contributed enormously to the success of businesses in downtown and to the vibrancy that made this area special. Although some office workers are returning to physical buildings, we recognize that there may not be a full return to 100% of employees working in offices five days a week. This leaves tremendous potential for new ways to look at under-utilized spaces and develop new partnerships and ideas to activate space, encourage different uses that will attract people, and bring excitement to downtown.

London has amazing arts and entertainment downtown such as The Grand Theatre, Budweiser Gardens, Museum London, London Music Hall, all contributing to the nighttime economy. However, these venues are not necessarily open or have programming every night that is affordable or accessible to the public for a multitude of reasons. The most successful downtowns are those that have a variety of daytime and nighttime activities, that have different price points, and that appeal to a broad range of people.

Downtown London is experiencing exponential growth in residential occupancy. Condos, apartments, and mixed-use buildings are all being built at a rate that we have not seen in decades. All of this bodes well for current businesses and creates opportunities for new and different businesses that will create the energy and excitement that we want for our city's core.

One of the largest properties in the core is Citi Plaza. This location has seen the loss of retail and restaurant businesses, leaving many vacant spaces. However, this property is beautiful – wide hallways, great lighting, tile floors, and during the holidays the centre court has one of the largest Christmas Trees in the city. The management of this property have been working to diversify the types of businesses located in the building with great success. One of the ongoing challenges is how to increase foot traffic to attract new retail and restaurants. Those businesses need to see foot traffic and want a location that already has “buzz”. Downtown London and MainStreet London worked closely with the roller-skating company (Retro Rollers) and Citi Plaza management to bring the roller skating idea to life.

AUDIENCE

One of MainStreet London's goals is to add to the vibrancy of the downtown core. We specifically seek out businesses and events that are different from what we already have and from our regular festivals and concerts. We want to develop a nighttime economy that offers a variety of activities that appeal to a broad demographic, that is affordable, and that does not compete with current festival and event operators.

Our research indicated that roller skating is making a tremendous come back, with expanding merchandise and customization options for participants. When you have a population willing to spend anywhere from \$150.00 to hundreds of dollars on footwear and gear, this is a growing trend that will last.

The initial concept of indoor skating at Citi Plaza was sparked by a visit to Retro Rollers storefront in Stratford, Ontario. This company has a wonderful boutique store that carries everything you need for skating: wheels, boots, pads, and other accessories for all ages. What sets this business apart from others is the small roller-skating area behind the wall of the store, complete with a mirror ball. Discussions with the owners confirmed our research:

- Roller skating is back in a BIG way;
- The demographics are broad: from ages 6 – 80's; all ethnic groups and backgrounds;
- Skating is affordable for those that want to rent skates – you don't need to purchase your own;
- *Almost any open space with a good surface works!*

Our primary target audience was 18 – 30-year old's. With Fanshawe College's campus now opened to in person classes this has added approximately 2,500 students to the area, who are looking for fun things to do. This population includes international students seeking non-alcoholic activities; students want to experience something different; and being physically active is important. The secondary market were the new downtown tenants moving into condos and apartments. This provided opportunities for downtown residents that will bring them out of their apartments and engage with downtown restaurants, events, and activities.

GOAL AND OBJECTIVES

Our goals were to create an exciting event that would attract a minimum of 150 people; to find partners that would potentially have a long-term vision for being involved in downtown; to be a potential new business to locate at Citi Plaza; and to establish Citi Plaza as a destination for unique activities.

The first skating night was Nov 26, 2022. All partners involved were overwhelmed by the positive response to this first night and a second evening was scheduled for Dec 29, 2022, with two times available to accommodate the demand and to create a time specifically for families with younger children.

IMPLEMENTATION

This was a collaborative effort with Retro Rollers, Citi Plaza management, Downtown London, and MainStreet London staff to support the concept and ensure success. Retro Rollers operates a successful business and has over 400 pairs of skates available for rentals plus they supply and operate the music. Citi Plaza's involvement was crucial to the success of the event: their custodial team ensured that the floors were cleaned from all debris that would impact skating; security helped manage crowds and solved any issues as the evening progressed as there was a concert being held in the library that night; and their management team encouraged one of the businesses (Bulk Barn) to stay open to sell drinks and snacks to skaters.

The budget for this project was \$1000. This included the costs of the security team, the radio station cost, and a rental fee for the space. Those were easily covered through admissions. MainStreet London took the lead with marketing and promotions. This was achieved through social media channels, e-blast newsletters from Downtown London and Citi Plaza, and word of mouth. Fanshawe College attended as a remote site and broadcast from the event. We used the radio station to help build buzz for any future events. The students operating the on-site broadcast were so enthusiastic once they saw what was happening that we did not need to add anything to the excitement.

The greatest challenge was simply overcoming any hesitation that this would not succeed. The MainStreet London Board were willing to take a risk on this event as the financial costs were extremely low and the worst thing would be that we did not reach our attendance targets.

Social media marketing is extremely accessible. We had planned to invest in paid promotions, but we did not require any additional advertising at all. We set a target of a minimum of 150 attendees and felt that if we had that many it would be considered a success.

RESULTS

This was an exceptional event. Our goal was to have a minimum of 150 attendees. The final ticket sales (all in advance) were slightly more than 470. On the first evening people started to line up at 5:45 for a 7:00pm start. Many people in line were hoping to get tickets at the door but they had to wait until 8:00pm so that we could see how many skate rentals would still be available.

Skating was from 7:00pm to 10:00pm and for the entire evening the joy was palpable from all skaters. There were several people that 'happened' upon the event and simply sat at centre court just to watch the skaters and the skate dancing. To see over 470 people skating and enjoying themselves so thoroughly was truly magical.

We were all very pleased to see that the research into demographics for skating was accurate: we had every age, background, and skill level represented. While most attendees were from London, we did have many people coming from Chatham, Hamilton, and Burlington. When the tourists identified themselves, they were asked why they came to this event, and they indicated that they are skating fanatics and relished the opportunity to skate in a mall.

Bulk Barn stayed open to sell refreshments and were so enthusiastic about the additional revenue that they asked if this could happen every weekend. One of the hopes for this event is that there would be spin off benefits for other businesses and it was wonderful to see this happening. With Bulk Barn being able to cover concession type sales meant that the organizers did not need to operate this component.

The response from attendees was tremendous. The social media posts were outstanding and really spread the word about what was happening. The best part was that so many of the skaters kept asking when the next night would happen.

On December 29 we ran two sessions: one earlier in the evening (6:30pm - 8:00pm) for families with younger children and a second session from 8:30pm - 10:00pm for adults. For these two sessions there were more than 800 advance tickets purchased. When the second date was announced, tickets sold in less than two weeks. Once again there were line-ups at the door looking for tickets to skate. Due to the configuration of the space, it is important to not overcrowd to ensure safety and lots of room for skaters.

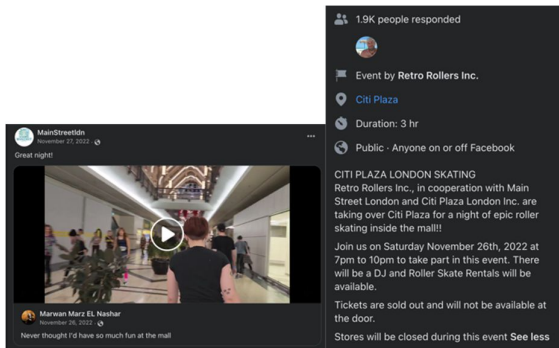
There are two more events scheduled in March and April 2023.

Roller Skating at Citi Plaza has brought new energy to a mall that had little excitement. In less than a month it became a talking point and a true destination for a unique activity. MainStreet is hoping that this will continue and eventually Retro Rollers will open a new location at Citi Plaza.

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS

[CBC article](#)

Sample social media posts



[Sample video](#)