



June 15, 2026

The Honourable Rechie Valdez

Secretary of State (Small Business and Tourism)

Minister of Women and Gender Equality

House of Commons

Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0A6

Re: Canada's Small Businesses and the Vibrant Downtowns Agenda – A Request for Partnership and a Meeting

Dear Secretary of State Valdez,

I am writing on behalf of the Ontario Business Improvement Area Association (OBIAA), the provincial network representing over 300 BIAs and more than 140,000 small businesses across Ontario. Business Improvement Areas are democratically governed, self-funded organizations that manage, promote, and invest in Canada's Main Streets - the historic commercial corridors and neighbourhood business districts where small businesses are not just economically significant, but are the social and cultural fabric of their communities.

We write at a moment of important national momentum. The Federation of Canadian Municipalities' Big City Mayors' Caucus released its Vibrant Downtowns initiative in June 2026, making the case that strong downtowns are essential to Canada's economic competitiveness, investor confidence, and national prosperity. OBIAA strongly supports those priorities. But we also want to ensure that as the federal government responds to this agenda, the voice and interests of Canada's small businesses - the businesses that anchor our Main Streets and define our commercial districts - are explicitly and meaningfully represented.

As Secretary of State for Small Business and Tourism, you are the federal cabinet voice best positioned to ensure that happens. We are writing to ask for your leadership, and for a meeting to discuss how your office and OBIAA can work together toward that goal.

What Small Businesses on Canada's Main Streets Are Experiencing

The BCMC's Vibrant Downtowns framework identifies three interconnected pressures - homelessness and housing instability, organized crime and public safety, and aging infrastructure and transit gaps - as the primary threats to downtown vitality. OBIAA's member BIAs experience all three of these daily, and their impacts on small business are direct and measurable:

- **Homelessness and housing instability** reduce customer traffic, affect the safety of employees and patrons, and erode the business confidence of owners considering whether to invest, expand, or remain in a commercial district.



- **Organized crime, extortion, and retail theft** impose direct financial and operational costs on small businesses that larger retailers can absorb but independent operators often cannot. For many of our members, these are not abstract concerns - they are weekly operational realities that affect staffing decisions, insurance costs, and business viability.
- **Infrastructure and transit gaps** limit the customer catchment area of Main Street businesses, reduce the attractiveness of commercial districts as destinations, and signal to potential investors that a community is not growing. For tourism-dependent businesses in particular - restaurants, retailers, hospitality operators - the quality of the public realm and infrastructure that surrounds them is a direct determinant of revenue.

Ensuring Small Businesses Have a Seat at the Table

The BCMC's Vibrant Downtowns initiative is an important and welcome step. But it is, by design, a municipal government-to-federal government conversation. The small businesses that actually occupy our downtowns - that pay the BIA levies, employ the workers, serve the customers, and absorb the consequences of downtown health or decline - are not yet at that table. OBIAA believes they need to be.

As the federal government designs and delivers the investments that will follow from the Vibrant Downtowns priorities - whether on homelessness, safety, transit, or housing - program design decisions will determine whether those investments work for small businesses or simply pass over them. Federal programs designed for large urban centres and major institutional partners do not always translate well to the independent operators, smaller communities, and mixed-use Main Street buildings that define Ontario's BIA districts.

What We Are Asking

We respectfully ask that you use the platform of your office to advance the following on behalf of Canada's Main Street small business community:

- **Ensure small business and BIA sector representation** in any federal-municipal working groups, advisory bodies, or intergovernmental tables established in response to the BCMC's Vibrant Downtowns initiative. The businesses that occupy our downtowns should have a voice in the programs designed to support them.
- **Champion a federal small business lens** in the design of downtown-related federal programs - including housing, safety, and infrastructure investments - to ensure eligibility criteria, program scale, and delivery mechanisms work for independent operators and smaller communities, not only for institutional-scale projects in major urban centres.
- **Address organized crime and extortion as a small business issue**, not only a public safety or policing issue. The costs borne by independent small businesses targeted by extortion, theft, and organized crime networks are a direct threat to the viability of Main Street commercial districts and warrant dedicated federal attention through your portfolio.



- **Recognize BIAs as a federal small business infrastructure asset.** Ontario's 300+ BIAs represent an existing, democratically accountable, community-rooted delivery network for small business support, place-making investment, and local economic development. Federal small business programming that flows through or in partnership with BIAs reaches independent operators at scale in ways that centralized programs often do not.

A Note on Tourism and Main Street Destinations

Your tourism mandate is directly relevant here. Canada's Main Streets - the historic downtowns, waterfront commercial strips, and neighbourhood shopping districts managed by BIAs - are among the most visited and economically significant tourism destinations in the country. Visitors do not come to Canada to see big box retail or suburban arterials; they come for the character, authenticity, and vitality of our historic commercial districts. A federal investment agenda that strengthens downtowns is simultaneously a tourism investment agenda, and we encourage your office to make that connection explicit in how federal tourism programming and destination development support is directed.

Request for a Meeting

OBIAA would welcome the opportunity to meet with you and your team to discuss how your office and ours can work together to ensure Canada's small businesses and Main Streets are well-served by the federal response to the Vibrant Downtowns agenda. We are happy to present our research, share member perspectives from across Ontario, and explore concrete areas of collaboration.

Canada's Main Streets are not the backdrop to economic activity - they are where economic activity happens, for millions of small business owners, their employees, and the communities they serve. We look forward to working with your office to ensure they receive the federal attention and investment they deserve.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Rachel Braithwaite', is written over a light blue horizontal line.

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