



Busking evokes sense of place

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Unceremoniously swept out of downtown nearly five years ago as potential nuisances, a change of attitude at City Hall may see buskers performing once again in the city core. That would be a refreshing direction, one that could add charm and creativity to the downtown, fostering what noted economist Richard Florida refers to as 'sense of place.' Florida is a leading advocate of developing culturally vibrant communities, saying they attract the 'creative classes,' leading to economic growth by building a city where people want to live, play, work and invest.

He was at Georgian College a few months ago, addressing an audience of business and community leaders that included a number of City of Barrie staff and elected officials. It seems someone was paying attention.

Before the city enacted its Nuisance Bylaw in May 2004 buskers were a relatively common sight in downtown Barrie. They were subsequently banished from the centre, under threat of loitering charges if they returned.

The move lumped street entertainers together with aggressive panhandlers and loiterers, who, it was suggested, intimidated and annoyed pedestrians. It's arguable whether the bylaw has resulted in any real change, but what's not disputed is that any potential for developing a charming 'busker' street scene evaporated.

Now, the city's cultural department is pondering the return of street performers to the downtown core. Rather than chasing talent away from public spaces, it seeks to "provide a stage" for it.

It's a small but telling shift in thinking, and fits in with the city's strategy of using arts and culture to spark economic growth. Buskers may only be a small part of that puzzle, but it's a sign the city is serious about heeding the advice of experts such as Florida.

Consider communities with vibrant street scenes. They leave lasting impressions. When people visit Barrie, they should want to return – perhaps permanently.

Of course, that doesn't mean anyone with a guitar should be able to set up shop on any street corner. The city is on the right track by suggesting that busking be "controlled," which will likely lead to auditions and perhaps licensing. A variety of talents should also be considered, from juggling to magic.

The strategy of creating a lively busking scene is a good one that has the potential to pay dividends down the road, and not only on the streets of downtown Barrie.