

Digital Main Street gets new government funding



by MICHAEL RILEY Local Journalism Initiative Reporter

In the South Algonquin Business Association newsletter on June 20, a program called Digital Main Street was mentioned that had received new funding to help out small businesses, not only in South Algonquin, but all across Ontario. On June 11, the government of Canada and the province of Ontario invested \$57 million in Digital Main Street and its programs. The majority of this funding will go towards their \$2,500 grant program, which enables small businesses to bolster their online presence. It will cover the cost of their Digital Squads, local students and staff to deliver the training on these online platforms and it will fund their ShopHERE program powered by Google and their forthcoming Future Proofing Main Street initiative. Digital Main Street was created back in 2016 by the City of Toronto and the Toronto Association of Business Improvement Areas to help businesses use technology like websites, social media and e-commerce platforms to grow their business. It's built around an online learning platform, structured training programs and their Digital Service Squad, a team of local street level members who help these businesses grow and manage their operations through technology. In 2018, Digital Main Street got funding from the province to implement its \$2,500 grant program for Ontario's small businesses. Melanie Joly, Canada's minister of economic development and official languages, said at the time of the funding announcement, that as local economies across Ontario reopen, her government is focused on ensuring that main streets don't just survive, but thrive. "These businesses are the backbone of our economy, a source of local jobs and local pride. Thanks to this major investment, they'll be able to expand their offerings and seize the many opportunities presented by online commerce," she said. Darryl Jullot is a senior manager at Digital Main Street and he says that the \$2,500 grant program expired on June 30, so the new funding will allow them to continue with it. "There's also a stream of funding for municipalities across Ontario to hire their own digital service squad to help them bolster their online presence. So, it's this idea of hyper local economic development. Local students and graduates helping local businesses," he says. Jullot says what sets Digital Main Street apart from its competitors is their approach. "We're not just doing the work for the businesses, we're showing how the work got done, teaching them so they will know how to do it for themselves. So how to make a website, how to update their products, how to manually update their inventory, how to post on social media channels. We kind of follow this weird intersect of strategy and execution, but then there's capacity building, teaching, training, knowledge transfer, kind of all in this package. That is what makes it a unique value proposition," he says. Jullot also mentions ShopHERE powered by Google, a program that provides independent small businesses and artists with a quick, easy and no cost way to start selling online immediately. It is funded in partnership with the federal and provincial governments and is also supported by other partners like Mastercard, Microsoft Shopify and Facebook. More information can be found at www.digitalmainstreet.ca/shophere. The program allows any such business that meets the eligibility criteria and wants an online store to have one built for them for 90 days. After the 90-day grace period, the minimum monthly charge is around \$40 a month. "With COVID-19 we decided to pivot and make it easier for small businesses. We'll build the store for them, but still provide all the training to run it themselves. There's also a bunch of incentives. Facebook Canada invested \$1 million in ad credit, so businesses can say they're on Facebook. There's also a shipping company we've partnered with that will provide businesses a \$25

credit on their first order. We wanted to make it as quick, easy and painless for small businesses as possible during the pandemic. They get a free online store with all those incentives for 90 days," he says. Another exciting program from Digital Main Street is its Future Proofing Main Street program, which will be launched on July 15. "We looked at geographic regions, business types, industries, those that have been hardest hit by COVID-19, like restaurants, bars and live music venues. We're looking at how to challenge the community to come forward with innovative solutions for Main Street. Show us what the solution is, we'll do a pilot and see if it works out," he says. Jody Didier is the executive officer of the Bancroft Business Improvement Area. She says that a number of businesses availed themselves of the assistance of the Digital Service Squad to help businesses get online. "In phase one, we served Wilberforce, Cardiff, Bancroft, Coe Hill, Madoc, Maynooth, Lake St. Peter, Combermere, Barry's Bay, Wilno and parts between. Last year, many business owners were unable to commit to the training required to obtain a Digital Transformation Grant. Often, these businesses are owner operated and there is little time for anything beyond regular business activities. Those who did successfully obtain this grant to improve their online presence are very happy with the results, many feeling that it made a huge difference during pandemic shutdowns," she says. Didier says that in phase two, the federal government is joining the province and the Ontario BIA Association to deliver the program. Responding to the feedback they got from phase one, they've reduced the required training time by 75 per cent, and the application process has been streamlined. She thinks that this will make it more accessible, with a more realistic time commitment from busy businesses and merchants. "The Bancroft BIA will be submitting an application this week and hopes to expand the territory a little, to assist small businesses in outlying areas by deploying the digital squad to these folks, to help them assess their digital needs, plan a direction, get a little bit of training and make an application for the transformation program. COVID-19 has certainly demonstrated the benefits of the internet for Main Street businesses and the Bancroft BIA board has always felt that the economic well-being of the region is tied to the sustainability of the individual communities within it. There's no doubt about it, together we are stronger," she says. Emily MacKinnon is the owner of Mack Attack Outdoors in downtown Bancroft, and says she applied for Digital Main Street last September and got the grant in October. "I had allotted the grant money for other items as COVID-19 was not present at this time. And I needed to have this money used prior to March 2020. I did use a small part of the money to help increase Facebook postings, to boost them so they would reach more people. However, again this was done prior to COVID-19. Sadly, I can not reapply for this grant to help with getting my online business up and running which would have been beneficial during this difficult time. It is not difficult to do the reporting as requested for the grant," she says. "With that being said, I do highly recommend that every business owner apply for this. "