

City to offer \$650,000 grocery store prize

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This is one heck of a grocery store coupon.

The city has budgeted a one-time \$650,000 prize to someone willing to bring a grocery store to Hamilton's downtown.

The details of the incentive have yet to be approved by council but the plan by staff is to open a request for proposals in May, asking proponents to outline their proposed location, size of the store, the breadth of product offerings, price points and any related services offered such as dry cleaning.

Competing bids will be scored.

The grocery incentive is part of a package of three new incentives aimed at boosting the core which total \$1.4 million over three years.

The lack of a grocery store in the core is a catch-22, says Glen Norton, the city's manager of urban renewal.

"The grocery stores are saying there aren't enough people living downtown to make the investment and the developers are saying people are complaining because there's no grocery store downtown. So it's a matter of who's going to go first. We're trying to break that logjam and get someone to take that risk."

He added that land prices downtown are more expensive than elsewhere in the city and that the grant can help bridge that gap and make a grocery store a viable venture. He's not aware of another municipality offering such an incentive.

The grant will be open to any individual or company, whether that's a large grocery chain, an independent entrepreneur or existing vendors at the Hamilton Farmers' Market.

Norton says the idea is not to create competition for the farmers' market but to provide a venue for



Gore Park. The city hopes owners of property facing Gore Park will take advantage of a program that offers incentives to spruce up buildings there. Gary Yokoyama/The Hamilton Spectator Source: The Hamilton Spectator

daily access to fresh meat, fruit and vegetables, a variety of dry goods and household essentials such as toilet paper and pet food.

Norton says The Spectator's Code Red series, which analyzed health and poverty data, pointed to the importance of ready access to affordable, fresh food. "Otherwise, people have no choice but to make bad choices which are both more expensive and unhealthy."

The second new incentive program is a \$50,000 matching grant for any property facing Gore Park making improvements that will mean better use of the building. That could be used for fixing store fronts, installing elevators or patching up a leaking roof to make upper floors inhabitable, for instance.

"Gore Park strikes a real chord with people," said Norton. "They won't feel the downtown is revitalized until Gore is. This goes right at that."

An interesting element of the grant is that the city will pay up to 75 per cent of the cost to remove a large sign and replace it with something "smaller and architecturally respectful," Norton said.

Many of the signs on buildings facing Gore Park do not conform to current sign bylaws but have been grandfathered. "We want the façade show through on these buildings. I don't like the carnival atmosphere in our downtown," Norton said.

A third new incentive offers a grant of up to \$10,000 to property owners improving facades in the city's community improvement project area (roughly Victoria to Queen, Hunter to the CN tracks, James Street and the newly added King and Main from Wentworth to the 403). Work can include new windows, repointed brick, signs, awnings, stucco or anything else that improves a property's street appearance.

There is \$400,000 allocated in the city's 2012 capital budget for the program.

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