

# ByWard Market retailers, residents want Ottawa to address crime, revitalization issues

Natalie van Rooy & Toulou Mazloum CTV News - July 22, 2024

Retailers and small businesses in the Byward Market are sounding the alarm over public safety and revitalization issues that they say the City of Ottawa is not effectively addressing.

In an open letter to city officials on Wednesday, retailers said issues such as the overdose crisis, homelessness, increasing crime and a lack of long-term parking are affecting the vibrancy of the market.

The letter was addressed to Sutcliffe, Rideau-Vanier Coun. Stephanie Plante, the ByWard Market District Authority, Ottawa Police Chief Eric Stubbs, the head of the National Capital Commission and Minister of Canadian Heritage Pascale St-Onge.

Christine Shaikin opened her first retail store in the Byward Market in 1982. She's loved the area for years, but recently, her sentiment has soured.

"To see it being destroyed in the last ten years is totally heartbreaking because people come here to see Ottawa, a beautiful city," said Saikin, the owner of Justine Studio Boutique.

Phil Emond organized the group that put together the letter. He says market retailers have been overlooked for years.

"Right now it's extremely challenging because of the social community issues and what we see as a lack of empathy and support for retailers in the market," he said.

Sutcliffe's office confirmed the letter was received and is being reviewed, but declined comment on Sunday.

The retailers and residents say there has been no progress in the last year to revitalize the market. They want the Byward Market District Authority to engage in conversations with the city, as well as council members and the National Capital Commission.

The group is calling for a "short term and five-year plan communicated to all residents and retailers" for the ByWard Market.

Plante says she agrees with many of the letter's positions.

"I actually agree with a lot of what they're saying, which is to bring the magic back to the ByWard Market," she said. "We have to animate it, we have to make it a place people want to visit, and we have to make sure that when people visit, they feel safe."

At the Silver Fox Barber Shop, the owner has started his own petition, asking for a larger police presence and for a change to parking bylaws.

"We just want to see some action being taken in the Byward Market," said owner Aldo Montemurro. "Hopefully we can come to some sort of agreement with our mayor to make our market safe and attract tourists, people to come and support local businesses."

The city has been stepping up its presence in the market and on Rideau Street in recent years, including by opening a neighbourhood operations centre in the Rideau Centre to be used as a base of operations for police officers as part of its new Community Outreach Response and Engagement (CORE) Strategy.

The CORE strategy has been criticized by some members of the community, who've said it would further punish vulnerable residents. Those opposed to the plan say they want to see more resources be spent on mental health initiatives, affordable housing, and aid for people with substance use disorders instead of more police officers.

Crime statistics from the Ottawa Police Service show an 8 per cent increase in the crime rate in the Rideau-Vanier Ward between 2022 and 2023, including a 1.7 per cent increase in violent crime and a 9.5 per cent increase in non-violent crime. There were 42,264 calls for service in the ward in 2023.

Here is the list of demands in the letter from retailers, small businesses and residents:

Make sure events do not occupy parking spaces on the streets for clients visiting local businesses and "make use of unused courtyards or already closed streets like William Street."

Allow clients to park for more than two hours if they renew their parking permit. "Clients are being ticketed when renewing their permit. It takes longer than two hours for a visit in the ByWard market," reads the release.

Bring back fruit, vegetable and flower merchants to the ByWard Market to give people a reason to visit. The group notes "all sorts of restrictions in the past resulted in the merchants leaving the ByWard market and relocating."

Install more lights and monitored cameras to make sure the market is a safe place.

Address the community issues by having officers patrolling the market. "Planning can occur at the social services agencies directly. No need to pay for such high rent at the Rideau Centre," reads the release.

Provide support to social services agencies and police to support the unhoused.

Renovate the area and make it more appealing.

Redefine the role of bylaw officers to address safety and parking issues.

Relocate three of the four shelters to other areas of the city.

Make sure the National Capital Commission "is part of the decision-making process and sits at the BMDA table. We are the national capital and we certainly don't look like a capital like other countries to visitors," the group says.

Encourage small businesses and restaurants, while limiting the number of cannabis stores in the market.

Utilize the unused courtyards for events planned by the BMDA – "no need to close down York Street and limit once again parking for our clients."



Pedestrians wander through Ottawa's ByWard Market. (Photo by Stefan Hiienurm on Unsplash)