



Walkers stroll past Miscellany Thrift and Vintage on Hastings Street.

[Link to story on The Thunderbird](#)

East Hastings neighbourhood loses beloved thrift store as development ramps up

Experts and community members weigh in on the push-pull between housing density and Vancouver's small businesses

By Zoë Yunker, April 1, 2020

Zainab Bernard has been a source of safety and support for the Hastings-Sunrise community throughout the 11 years she's been operating her thrift store, Miscellany Thrift and Vintage.

From the store's inception, Bernard has offered gift certificates to women in transition houses, and she has hired staff with barriers to employment.

Sometimes Miscellany simply offers a space for people living on the street to spend some time because "it's cold, it's raining, and you know, that's okay, too," Bernard says.

Now she's having to shut the doors on that shop and, although she will still operate her second location at Main and Broadway, the Hastings Sunrise neighborhood will lose a cornerstone of

the community. Her store, and the two operating beside it, are moving out to make way for a new development with five stories of rental units and retail space below.

It's a familiar story for Vancouver, recently dubbed the second least affordable city in the world. It's a problem with two faces: it's getting more expensive for people to live, and small businesses are struggling to adapt to the pace of development.

"It's a double-edged sword." says Tom Wanklin, a senior planner at the city of Vancouver.

"You've got a desperate housing shortage and affordability issues and then you've got a desire to have new development to provide housing. And then that means you displace your existing businesses by demolishing old buildings."

While Bernard's business is impacted by this very dynamic, she is steadfast on the importance of housing and thinks that developments like this one offer some respite to Vancouver's critical shortage. She's seen her friends struggling to find housing, and she wants to see more of it in the city.

Zainab Bernard takes a break in the women's fashion section at Miscellany.



"People need homes and, in Vancouver, there's no homes. There's no places to rent." she says.

Weighing in on the role of small business

Still, Miscellany offers a poignant example of what communities stand to lose when small businesses are displaced. For residents in the Hastings-Sunrise neighborhood, Miscellany is a place where people feel seen and recognized. Liz Lougheed Green, director of community investment at Vancity and a longtime Hastings-Sunrise resident, is one of them.

“People know Zainab, they know her by name. Always when I pop in there are other people there—she knows them and all they know her, so she’s kind of a family member in the community” she says.

City planners widely acknowledge that small businesses can be powerful sources of community and connection that bring neighbourhoods together.

Full racks of clothing at Miscellany Thrift and Vintage.

“A lot of us are saying that the city’s losing some of its soul by the loss of these businesses. This



is what makes Vancouver unique, makes the neighborhoods unique,” says Wanklin.

Small businesses caught in the flood of Vancouver development

Despite their benefits, there are lots of reasons why businesses are particularly vulnerable to the wave of development sweeping Vancouver.

“Local businesses, in terms of the commercial tenants, just don’t have all that many rights with respect to maintaining their tenancies.” says Nathanael Lauster, an associate professor of sociology at the University of British Columbia who researches urban planning and sustainability.

Part of the problem lies in the way that properties are valued. New development and overall rises in property values citywide increase the value of the surrounding buildings — and the property tax rises with it.



Graffiti marks the development notice for the mixed retail-residential building that will replace Miscellany and four other storefronts.

“For many years when property values were relatively stable, it wasn’t seen to be a problem,” says Wanklin. “But with the escalation in value and higher taxes, it’s become a very, very big burden for small business.”

It’s called “highest and best use” assessment, and it means that property taxes are calculated according to the value of the surrounding properties. As land continues to be bought up, developed and rezoned to allow for taller buildings and condos atop retail spaces, property taxes continue to ramp up across the city.

If the street is zoned for high-density residential-commercial units, single–storey buildings are assessed and then taxed as if the development had already been built. The burden of making up the difference often falls to small businesses through their growing rent bills.

The entire area surrounding Miscellany is about to be rezoned for six stories of development — surpassing the previous limit of four stories — meaning that even more small businesses in single-storey retail spaces will be feeling the pinch.



Miscellany and four other storefronts will be displaced by the new development

Lauster suggests that another issue lies in the way that the city limits development to major arterial streets. Much of Vancouver's land is reserved for single-family zoning, which allows a house, basement suite and a laneway at the most. That means that most of the city's new density is funnelled on major streets, and property values are rising accordingly.

The city of Vancouver steps in to help

Recognizing that small businesses are crunched by Vancouver's rapid development, the city is testing a pilot project investigating and testing methods to help them survive. This is new territory for the city. Historically, municipalities focused their efforts on providing infrastructure and amenities for communities.

"Businesses tended to be left to the private sector to work on and to deal with," Wanklin says. "Now we're starting to say that there's a need for us to try and see where we can help"

Working in partnership with Vancouver's business improvement associations, the project focuses on a few key areas like Chinatown and Strathcona, but it may expand throughout the city if the pilot proves successful.

Lots of policy options and incentives are on the table. The city is also looking to support businesses with marketing, renovations and by promoting the business areas they reside in.

And they are considering providing targeted support to businesses that have long-standing cultural connections to the city. San Francisco is a leader on this front, says Wanklin.

That city's legacy-business program provides grants for businesses 30 years and older that have strong community ties.



Miscellany has supported women's transition houses since it started 11 years ago.

Now Wanklin and his colleagues are putting together a proposal for a made-in-Vancouver heritage business program that will be workshopped with the business improvement associations.

But some are concerned that attempts to define the qualities of "heritage" designation might become a Pandora's box of tough decisions.

"How do you choose winners and losers?" says Patricia Barnes, executive director for the Hastings North Business Improvement Association, the organization that represents the Hastings-Sunrise neighbourhood.

It's a relevant question for Miscellany. With only 11 years under its belt, the store wouldn't qualify for heritage designation under San Francisco's program. But Barnes agrees that

Miscellany is an integral part of the community. Bernard is a “fantastic role model,” she says. “She has a huge loyal following here.”

Will the city’s efforts be enough to save small businesses?

While the city’s targeted support may provide some respite for select businesses, Barnes thinks that there is a bigger picture that warrants attention.

“There are major systemic issues underlying the unaffordability of the City of Vancouver”

For Lougheed at Vancity, those underlying issues are connected to developers’ expectations to see high rates of return on their investments.

“We are shooting ourselves in the foot”, she says. “The higher the land values go, the more speculative land becomes and the more unaffordable things become.”

As Miscellany joins the scores of businesses relocated or closed to make way for new development, Lougheed thinks these issues worth considering.

“We’ve seen the proliferation of the Tim Hortons and the Dairy Queens. They weren’t the fabric of this community, but they can pay the rent. I think we have to pay attention to that. I want us to pay attention to that.”