



'Hugely significant': Halton Hills' Digital Main Street program helps local artist weather COVID-19 storm

Second round of funding announced for Digital Main Street

Herb Garbutt Independent Free Press
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Darlene Hartung had just opened her art studio in Williams Mill. Her plan was to wait a year and then evaluate whether she should keep it.

Then, six months in, the COVID-19 pandemic brought a lockdown, closing the studio. For someone who relied on foot traffic and word of mouth for exposure for her work and the lessons she taught, it was far from ideal.

Looking for some ways to boost her business, she took the Artrepreneur Halton Hills course offered by the town. It was there where she heard of another program she thought might help.

Digital Main Street, a provincially and federally funded program administered by the Town of Halton Hills through its economic recovery and resilience plan, helps businesses improve their online presence.

Hartung was among the close to 70 small businesses to benefit from the program that saw the town award a total of \$50,000 in grants. Now the town has received another \$45,000 to continue the program.

“COVID-19 has caused significant hardship for our small businesses,” said Halton Hills Mayor Rick Bonnette. *“Enhanced online tools are critical to assisting our businesses in interacting with their customers and to generate and maintain much-needed revenue.”*

To be eligible, businesses must have a physical storefront and fewer than 50 employees. Grants can be used toward new websites, hardware or software. A digital service squad will also be available to help with social media, setting up business profiles and providing website and e-commerce support. The deadline for businesses to apply for a digital transformation grant is Oct. 31.

After applying and being approved, Hartung met for an evaluation.

“In a very polite way, they told me my site was a little dated,” Hartung said with a laugh.

She worked with a website designer and builder to [create a new site](#). She said town staff were very helpful whenever she had questions about the program.

Hartung, who specializes in photorealistic drawings and also gives lessons to kids and adults, said her business has increased by 60 per cent and most of the spots in her classes have been filled.

“It’s been hugely significant,” said Hartung. *“Sending people to the old site, it didn’t look modern. It didn’t really reflect what I do. There was no mention of lessons. I was probably losing customers because of it.”*

Now as she approaches her second year at Williams Mill, her evaluation is complete.

“There’s no question, I’ll be keeping the studio,” she said.

Herb Garbutt is a feature writer for the Burlington Post, Oakville Beaver, Milton Canadian Champion and The Independent & Free Press. He has been covering local news at daily and community papers for 30 years.